Bonds

CHAPTER 1

With the burning glint of orange slowly peeking over the horizon, a new day was about to begin over Saitama. The warmth of the spring day brought cheery attitudes as only a few months ago, the country of Japan was hit hard with an unusually fierce winter that resulted in record snowfall. These warming months not only brought better weather, but great senses of optimism and the idea of making the spring and upcoming summer ones to remember. The lushes green shrubbery and landscapes invited better days ahead of them as the sun rose higher into the sky.

At a house in Saitama, a blue-haired girl slowly stirred in her bed as her alarm clock buzzed. Her head feeling like a solid rock at the moment, she dreaded school today. She was never a big fan of school to begin with but she especially didn't want to go today as she had only been asleep for two hours. Konata Izumi could never resist turning away from her online games, especially when she got on a roll, which was the case last night and it led her to play it all night. She knew an earful from her teacher was waiting for her when she arrived today after she would see the dark circles under her eyes. The fact that they had a quiz today only made Konata want to pile more covers on as her way of hiding from the inevitable. She even forgot to pull an all-nighter for this quiz.

Regardless, she heard the salmon-haired girl living with her also begin her morning routine and Konata knew at least she wouldn't suffer alone today as she knew the freshman were due for exams too. This motivated Konata to rise from her bed and stretch. She exited her bedroom and saw her cousin, Yutaka Kobayakawa, begin fixing breakfast for the both of them. It was a rare sight to see her salmon-haired cousin cook for her. Usually it was the other way around but there was something in the budding spring weather that made everyone feel better about themselves. The warm weather brought on a sort of "new spring resolution" for everyone to better themselves and this was what Yutaka had in mind for herself. Konata smiled at the warm gesture and came closer to eat the breakfast her cousin was preparing out of the kindness of her heart for her.

Today was going to be a good day. Konata and Yutaka could feel it.

The sun rose higher and touched another house that bordered a religious shrine, where two fraternal twin girls awoke to the beeping of their alarm clocks. Well, one of them anyway. One of the twins with her long hair a sporadic mess lifted her eyes as she reached to her nightstand and turned it off, sat up, and stretched high to allow herself to wake up. Faintly, she could hear the incessant beeping of her sister's clock through the wall still going and all she could do was sigh. Despite the warm and cheery weather, her younger sister still didn't want to wake up, even though they had school today. Regardless, this fraternal twin and the most mature, Kagami Hiiragi, pulled herself out of bed and began assembling herself for her day at school.

She performed her morning routine of showering and tirelessly shampooing her long hair until every follicle was spotless. It became easier when her hair was dried and she divided them into her trademark twin pigtails with dark purple ribbons. Her morning cleansing routine was long and it frustrated Kagami when she finally reemerged from the bathroom half an hour after she woke up, only to see her younger twin, Tsukasa Hiiragi, finally step out of her room. She rubbed her sleepy eyes and wobbled with every step while trying to find the bathroom. Despite Kagami always trying to set a good example, the lessons always seemed to elude her sister. They were twins, but they had very little else in common aside from trivial things such as both being left-handed. Still, Kagami went to bed each night thanking her lucky stars that she had a sister like Tsukasa by her side.

When the two twins ate their breakfast, they were joined by the rest of their larger family. Their biggest sister, Inori, their middle sister, Matsuri, their mother, Miki, and their father, Tadao. As they sat together on that peaceful spring morning and enjoyed their breakfast, they looked like the epitome of everything that was pure and righteous in a traditional family. Though they would never admit it, they sometimes believed that if all families in the world were as close-knit as they were, the world would be a much better place to live in. As Kagami and Tsukasa ate their breakfast together and continued to think of the day ahead of them, they finally had one thought in common amidst the

laughter and happy rhetoric of their family.

Today was going to be a good day. Kagami and Tsukasa could feel it.

Across Saitama in a more luxurious and upscale neighborhood, a pink-haired girl had already been up for over an hour and was ready to grace the hallways of her high school once again. Miyuki Takara credited her early start to her day to always getting to bed early and the previous night was no exception. As she investigated herself in a hallway mirror, she scanned herself through her glasses and looked for any wrinkle or stain on her blue and white school uniform. She was flawless, as always.

Smiling happily, Miyuki grabbed her schoolbag and made her way to her large house's front door. As she walked, she passed her mother sitting in their spacious kitchen drinking a cup of coffee.

"I'm off to school, mother." Miyuki said with a smile.

Miyuki's mother, Yukari Takara, rested her steaming cup of coffee down and turned to her daughter with a smile. "Have a good day, dear, now where's my kiss?"

Miyuki blushed at her mother's request but sighed happily regardless and approached her mother. One thing Miyuki always loved about her mother was her older sister persona she presented at times, and even her childlike guise charmed her. Yukari was the mother and wife of a fantastic household, yet she still only clung to the simple things in life. She enjoyed long walks in the park to watch the leaves change colors in autumn, she loved drinking tea under a starlit summer night while listening to the cicadas, and she especially loved her traditional goodbye kiss from her daughter before she went off to school.

Miyuki kissed her loving mother on her cheek with a giggle and turned back to the door. Yukari gave her farewells to her daughter while keeping her smile. She was so proud of her daughter and what she had been able to accomplish in all of her academic pursuits up until now. She sighed happily as she turned

back to resume drinking her coffee.

As the pink-haired girl walked down the desolate sidewalk towards her station to take her to school, she looked up at the towering trees lining the sidewalk of her quiet neighborhood. She could see the sun's early morning rays peak through them and turn the moisture on the green leaves into colorful prisms and the rainbow lights danced for her in the sun's skyward movements. It was truly a beautiful day as she felt the sun's warm rays inviting her into today's endless opportunities to continue to live in this beautiful world. As she walked with her bag in tow while listening to the birds chirp and sing happily above her, Miyuki had only one thought in mind as she giggled and smiled to herself.

Today is going to be a good day. Miyuki could feel it.

"Oh no, I forgot my history book!" Tsukasa suddenly exclaimed as she walked side-by-side her older twin sister at the train station and awaiting their transportation that would take them to school.

Kagami groaned. "Again?! What have I told you about trying to remember your own book?!"

Tsukasa blushed and giggled lightly. "I know, I know. I can't help it though, sis. I'm not as smart as you are. I wish I was as smart and beautiful as you are."

Kagami rolled her eyes and couldn't help but laugh silently to herself at her sister's attempt at sucking up to her. "Whatever. I'll let you borrow it at lunch after I have history class."

Tsukasa giggled happily. "Thank you, sis!"

Kagami glanced forward and saw her blue-haired otaku friend also approaching the platform where their train was due to arrive. The twin-tailed girl waved at Konata but stopped when she saw the dark circles under her eyes and once again, Kagami sighed as Konata approached them.

"Gaming it up again last night, eh?" Kagami stated with sarcasm as Konata struggled to keep her eyes open in the bright sunny weather. "You know this is our last year at Ryōō High School so I would think that you would want to take it a bit more seriously since college is just around the corner."

"I couldn't help it, Kagamin. I found another ultra rare item last night and I just couldn't stop! It was my destiny! Onward to victory!" Konata exclaimed.

School hadn't even started yet and already Kagami felt mentally exhausted by her sister's and her friend's peculiar habits. Kagami's only response was her own exhausted feelings while Tsukasa only giggled. "Like I've said before; I'll never understand the world you live in, Konata."

The roar of the train approaching the station caught their attention and the massive machine stormed in and came to a screeching halt at their platform. Today continued to unfold as a regular day as the four girls boarded the train and were fortunate enough this morning to find four empty seats next to each other. The train pulled out of the station and began to take them to yet another regular but still uplifting day at school while they continued to converse.

"Isn't the weather beautiful today?" Tsukasa asked cutely as she watched the sun continue to rise and light Saitama.

"It is. I don't know about the rest of you guys but I feel great today." Kagami stretched her arms upward and continued to breathe in the spectacular weather. "What's great about this weather is that as soon as the first day of spring arrived on the calendar, it changed to this. It was like a light switch turning winter off and this perfect spring weather on."

"Yeah, that never happens. Most of the time spring comes and it's still so darn cold out. Sometimes it even still snows so this is great!" Tsukasa's vibrant voice graced the train like a wind chime. "I even feel more energetic with this weather. Kona-chan, what do you think?"

Kagami and Tsukasa turned to Konata and a red vein popped on Kagami's head while a large sweat drop formed over Tsukasa's head as

she closed her eyes and giggled when they saw their friend. Konata was fast asleep and drooling over herself as she snored bluntly. Clearly the springtime energy hadn't taken its toll on her yet, though Kagami was annoyed by her laziness more than anything.

When the train came to a stop at their station, Konata was still asleep. Because Tsukasa was too nice to do it, Kagami took the initiative to wake the blue-haired otaku up. Kagami grabbed Konata's shoulder and shook her roughly while calling her name and the twin-tailed girl got a reaction out of her friend, though it wasn't one she expected.

Konata jumped up and exclaimed, "Nagato, no, that's my cupcake!"

The impulsive outburst caught the Hiiragi twins off guard and they couldn't contain their laughter as Konata looked around, still dazed and confused. Some of the other passengers in the train also caught the comment and giggled lightly as they departed the car.

Wiping a tear away, Kagami took Konata's wrist and escorted her and Tsukasa off the train while adding, "Come on you crazy little weirdo."

"But Asahina just baked cupcakes." Konata replied with a yawn, still trying to wake up and still caught in purgatory between being awake and being asleep.

Activity at Ryōō High School also added credibility to the fact that spring had finally arrived. All around, students brandished their sparkling uniforms as they conversed with each other around the schoolyard before the morning bell rang. Cherry blossom petals rained down on top of them, adding fresh color to the scene as Konata, Kagami, and Tsukasa arrived together. They suddenly saw Miyuki Takara also walking through the crowd towards their school and they quickly rushed over to her and walked inside with her.

The school bell finally chimed and the students filed into the large building. It was shaping up to be another ordinary day at their school as Kagami was forced to part ways with Konata, Tsukasa, and Miyuki. The students continued to pass each other and maneuver to their assigned classrooms as if nothing out of the ordinary was happening.

The activity was so mainstream and borderline scripted that nobody noticed one pupil was arriving late at Ryōō High School. As the student entered the gate, they also didn't notice this student was dressed from head to toe in black clothing and carrying a large duffle bag. Instead of walking in through the front doors, the student quickly ducked under cover and navigated towards the service entrance where the janitor worked and planned on entering the school from there.

The majestic and optimistic springtime weather regrettably never reached this student's mentality.

"Are you feeling any better, Kona-chan?" Tsukasa asked as the tired blue-haired girl took her seat next to the youngest Hiiragi twin.

Konata slowly nodded and yawned again. "Yeah sure, I'm fine. I'm just dreading this quiz we have today. Ms. Kuroi is going to hit me again, I just know it."

Tsukasa giggled. "Aw, it'll be all right. Just take it one step at a time and the sooner we can get through school, the sooner we'll be able to get out and enjoy the weather outside."

"You mean the sooner we can get through school, the sooner we'll be able to go home and call it a day." Konata replied as she wiped another sleepy about of her eye as their blonde-haired teacher entered the room.

"Alrighty class, time to take your seats." Ms. Kuroi said and the rest of the students began to sit down. "We have our history quiz today so I assume you all have been studying for it. Some of this material will also be on your final so I advise you to pay extra attention to the questions."

As the dreaded quiz began to unfold for Konata, Kagami sat in her classroom with her friends Misao Kusakabe and Ayano Minegishi sitting around her. Her homeroom teacher, Hikaru Sakuraba, also entered the room with her daily planner and everyone quickly took their seats when they saw the look on her face. Unbeknownst to her, she also wasn't a fan of being awaken from her deep slumber like Konata or Tsukasa and walked into this day with a bitter glow in her eyes. Every time her students saw her like this, they knew they were in for a world of pain. She even scared Kagami from time to time.

"Alright, class. Take your seats and let me take attendance." Sakuraba snapped.

Misao scooted closer to Kagami and whispered, "She seems a little fired up this morning."

"This morning? Where have you been since the semester started? Now stop this or we'll get in trouble." Kagami hissed in a low voice.

Misao groaned and scooted away from Kagami. She wished that the twin-tailed girl would lighten up more and break just one rule in her life, if only for the sake of doing it and nothing else. Ayano however remained passive with a smile and a sigh as their day continued to unfold just like the rest of their fellow classmates.

Down the school's corridor in the freshman hallway, the teacher for the classroom where Minami Iwasaki, Yutaka Kobayakawa, and Hiyori Tamura still hadn't shown up yet. He was obviously running late again but this didn't bother the students as they continued to talk with each other and some even saw it as filling up time until school was over. It wasn't the first time their teacher was late and every day the students hoped it wouldn't be the last either.

"Hey, did you understand this equation from last night?" Yutaka asked as she moved closer to Minami and showed her the math homework from the previous night.

"Yes, actually. I was having the same problem last night but Miyuki helped me. You take the value of X and divide it by the common denominator and then multiply it by seven." Minami walked Yutaka through the steps and she followed keenly.

As Minami and Yutaka continued to help each other with their studies, Hiyori Tamura seemed troubled by something. Though it was against school policy to have cell phones during school hours, Hiyori was worried about a deeply troubling message she had received last night. A little past midnight the previous night, a text message arrived on her phone. It was simple in its wordage but still troubling enough to raise a red flag or two.

We've had some good times together. Stay away from school tomorrow.

She had been trying to reach the person who sent the text to her all morning but to no avail. Sighing, she suddenly felt the presence of another girl gripping shoulders and she turned to see Patricia Martin stand above her with a charming smile.

"What's going on, Hiyorin?" She asked innocently. "You look pretty tense."

Hiyori closed her cell phone and slipped it into her skirt pocket. "Yeah, I'm fine. I just got a weird message last night and I've been trying to figure it out. Anyway, I need to use the bathroom so if the teacher comes in let him know where I'm at."

Patty agreed and Hiyori excused herself from the classroom. She walked down the empty hallway and ducked into the bathroom, just as another figure rounded the corner dressed in black but no longer carrying the duffle bag. The figure's identity was covered by a black mask and the figure's body was clothed by black apparel as the person carried something else in their arms, which was a thousand times more frightening than the clothes being worn. The figure casually walked past the bathroom where Hiyori disappeared into only seconds earlier.

The figure approached the classroom and could hear the endless chatter of the students, as well as their own heart pounding in their chest. So many months of suffering had produced so many months of planning and it had all come to this. If only they didn't discover this person's secret obsession. If only they didn't harass and abuse this person because of it despite her higher upbringing. If only this person's parents had listened to the cries for help. Everything that was about to unfold here at Ryōō High School could've been avoided.

The figure slid the classroom door open and walked in as the mindless chatter continued. Most didn't even notice the new and hostile presence walk into the room as today's events were only seconds away from unfolding. With Minami Iwasaki and Yutaka Kobayakawa's backs to the door, they too were oblivious to what was unfolding behind them as more people in the classroom began to take notice of the black-clothed presence in the room.

One of the boys in the class looked up and said, "Hey what the hell is

this? Is it Halloween or—"

The day that started out so perfect and picturesque with the ideal weather and harmonious waves of tranquility drifting through everybody's souls suddenly changed. It all started with a noise that rocked not only the entire classroom but the entire school. It was like a clap of thunder echoing in the room when a bullet tore through the boy's head, exited the other side, and the boy's lifeless body fell to the floor. Unparalleled and ear-piercing screams from everyone in the room followed as more thunderous bangs echoed.

Gunfire.

CHAPTER 2

"You're right…it is simply impossible to arrange such a syntax that would be able to vocalize a discourse that would accurately portray that repugnant odor." Miyuki said to Tsukasa with a laugh as they continued to talk after their quiz was over.

"I know and the worst part is that it never stops!" Tsukasa exclaimed with another giggle.

Amidst their chatter, a pop suddenly echoed throughout the hallway and it caught everyone's attention. Some paid more attention to it than others. Some of the students brushed it off as freshman horseplay while others were simply intrigued by the mysterious sound. It wasn't until the sudden tidal wave of white noise forming an inaudible clamor struck their ears that they realized something was different. It sounded like screams, which was followed by another pop, then another, then another, and then another.

"What the hell is going on out there? Some sort of a party?" Ms. Kuroi asked and stood to walk over and investigate while the students were still unaware of what was happening.

She opened the door and to her sudden horror, an ensemble of freshmen students dashed past her with terrified expressions on

their faces, most of them crying. It wasn't until one of them sprinted past Kuroi with their blue and white uniform top stained in bloodspots and crying that the teacher realized something was wrong. She tried to grab another passing student's attention but it proved futile as they were all beyond panicked at this point. Something new caught her eye and she turned her head back down the hallway where the students were running from.

It happened so fast that Kuroi didn't even have time to defend herself. All her students could do was sit back with tension as they heard another loud bang and witnessed a flying projectile strike their teacher's abdomen and exit the back. The sudden and violent movement took all of Kuroi's muscular abilities away and the teacher fell like a house of cards in the breeze. When they watched their teacher fall to the tile floor, it sent the classroom into an uproar and two students took the initiative and grabbed Kuroi's lifeless wrists and dragged her back into the room, leaving a large blood trail out her back over the tile floor, deepening the students' screams.

Two boys were smart enough to slam the classroom door shut and lock it as everyone else continued to panic as they witnessed more blood flow from their teacher's back, as well as the small hole in her stomach. Tsukasa was without a doubt the most upset as she continued to scream and cry despite others' attempts at calming her and keeping her quiet. It proved impossible to calm the youngest Hiiragi twin when more automatic bangs echoed in the hallway and they were getting closer. Konata tried her best to calm the crying Tsukasa but it too was impossible even though it was coming from her. Konata herself was trying to play two roles at once by keeping Tsukasa calm and herself calm; both though proving to be losing battles.

As the panic continued to engulf the classroom, Miyuki took a deep breath despite her burning fear and stepped forward to Ms. Kuroi as she laid on her back, still bleeding. Something in the back of Miyuki's mind was already telling her this, but she still had to see for herself and make sure there wasn't anything that could be done. Miyuki bent down to her knees and felt her teacher's neck and wrists, desperate to find any signs of life but it was no use. Her pulse was gone and the dilated pupils in Kuroi's eyes told her all she needed to know that her teacher was gone. Frightened and saddened, Miyuki let a tear slip from her eye as

she took her fingers and gently closed Ms. Kuroi's eyelids.

"Oh shit we need to get out of here now!" One of the students cried and was immediately shushed by the others.

"Shut up, you idiot! You want that psycho outside to hear?!" Another hissed quietly for them to hear.

The group of students began to congregate into the back of the class and away from the door as more shadows passed the window. By now everyone knew what was happening; a school shooting was underway. It seemed the killer who had infiltrated their school shot their teacher and went down another corridor but they could still hear the popping of the firearm echoing throughout the building. Every time they heard the pop, everyone cringed a little more and no one knew what to do.

The static of the school's intercom suddenly erupted and the principal's voice followed. "Attention students, there is an intruder in the building. This is not a drill. Please follow your teachers to the nearest exit as quickly as possible. Anyone who cannot reach an exit please stay inside your classrooms and barricade the doors. The police are on their way right now so please try and remain calm."

The voice ended and Konata, Tsukasa, and Miyuki, as well as the rest of the students, looked at their deceased teacher only a few feet in front of them. She still rested in a large puddle of her own blood and remained lifeless, only deepening Tsukasa's dismay as she cried. She had never seen a dead body before let alone witness someone be killed right in front of her. It was a horrifying experience and she felt the pain in her core continue to swell with her fear as another shot echoed and more screams followed in the hallway.

"We still need to get out of here." Another student said.

"Didn't you hear what the principal said? We need to stay here and wait for help to arrive." Miyuki whispered as she took Tsukasa in her arms and held her close as she continued to sob.

"That guy out there is going to come back. He's going to kill us all." Another whispered and more panic began to engulf the classroom.

Students began to exchange terrified looks with each other and whispered to each other. They couldn't believe this was happening to them. The day had started so perfectly but now their teacher was dead, as well as other students they presumed and they were trapped in the building with a madman. Konata couldn't help but glance outside and saw the perfect weather was still getting better as the morning hours progressed but they were trapped in this cage of unparalleled horrors. Now the only thing they had in mind was freedom and living to see tomorrow.

"Stop saying stuff like that and listen to Miyuki!" Konata snapped at the student. "We have to stay here now help us barricade the door with whatever we can find!"

"Shut up you little freak don't you get it?! A bunch of desks and chairs won't stop bullets! We need to get out of here!" An angry male student yelled, further deteriorating the situation. "I'd rather take my chances in the hallway than being stuck in this deathtrap with you assholes!"

"Please I beg you, lower your voice!" Miyuki hissed as Tsukasa's crying grew more incessant. "Think this through! Look at what happened to Ms. Kuroi when she simply poked her head out of the classroom! How long do you think you'll last out there if you make a run for it?!"

"Fuck you! I want to live!" The boy screamed and dashed to the window and ripped it open. He looked down and without a second thought, jumped from the third story window and he instantly regretted the decision when he landed. Over the pops of gunfire in the hallway, they could hear his legs break like twigs, followed by his screaming.

It was seeing the desperate attempt to escape that made the powder keg in Ms. Kuroi's classroom explode. The rest of the students screamed louder and began clawing over each other to get to the exit. Their panic was so intense that they didn't even

notice that some even trampled over the body of their dead teacher in attempts to pile out of the door, leaving only Konata, Miyuki, and Tsukasa alone with the late Ms. Kuroi.

It suddenly became deafly quiet in the classroom aside from Tsukasa's sobbing into Miyuki's bosom as she continued to hold the frightened girl close. It only got worse when the shooting outside intensified and Miyuki could hear some of the blood-curdling screams of a few students from the classroom until more gunfire silenced them.

Konata gulped and turned to Miyuki. "What do you think we should do?"

With the situation for Ms. Kuroi's class at a point of no return, things also weren't so hot for Sakuraba's class. The students were heeding the principal's words and following their teacher through the hallway at a hastened pace and eyed the exit sign and freedom through the glass doors under the sign. Kagami was showing her brave tsundere side and helping her teacher in keeping everyone calm as they had an advantage most students didn't. Their class was very close to an exit and the assailant in the school was in another wing as far as they could tell so their area was completely untouched by the violence. However, Kagami's heart still pounded both from fear of the killer, but also for her sister.

She felt mixtures of fear and anger at the same time. It was this kind of instance where Kagami really wanted to be in the same class as her sister because if she was, she could be there for her. She would be the one who was comforting her, taking her by her hand, and leading her to safety. The only thing Kagami could take comfort in was the fact that Miyuki and Konata were there with her and she trusted those two with both her and Tsukasa's lives. Still, Kagami couldn't help but feel betrayed by the school system. She had worked so long and so hard for the school she attended and was involved in so many extracurricular activities that required more of her time and effort. And in the end all she wanted was a request so simple—to be in the same class as her sister—yet the school wouldn't let it happen. Now, the school was under attack and she just knew that her younger sister was somewhere in the building lost and scared, probably crying too.

As Kagami continued to walk a fast pace, Misao once again caught up with her. "I can't believe this is happening. Of all the screwed up things; a school shooting…and here at Ryōō of all places."

Kagami nodded. "I know, I know. But we're almost out of here so let's just keep it together."

"I have to admit though, Hiiragi, you're taking all of this in stride. Especially considering the fact that your sister is still somewhere in here." Misao bluntly stated while rearing her oblivious side to Kagami's feelings. "I mean if it was my sister stuck in a school with a psychopath I wouldn't be able to contain myself. I would be pulling my hair out and—"

"Misao, shush!" Ayano elbowed her bluntly and reared her rare aggressive side. Ayano could see the hurt on Kagami's face and in her eyes and could see that the twin-tailed girl was scared for her sister. Though Misao was a good friend, she still lapsed in judgment every now and then when it came to reading people's cues. She recognized her faux pas and backed away, giving Kagami some much desired space.

As they made their final approach to the large doors, the unexpected and terrifying happened. The students could hear the thud of thick combat boots hitting the floor and everyone's hearts leaped into their throats when they saw the assailant round the corner in front of the exit doors, blocking their only escape and turn to them. The assailant was dressed from head to toe in black clothing with a black ski mask disguising their identity and the gunman held the arsenal they were using to unleash this death storm. The killer held a military styled rifle while an automatic pistol was tucked in the assailant's belt, along with magazines holding the metal projectiles of death attached to clips on the black tactical vest being worn by the attacker. A knife in its sheath was also taped to one of the boots.

Full-blown panic erupted from Kagami's classmates as they quickly turned and began to run in the direction from which they came as their screams tore through the once quiet hallway. Before Kagami also turned and ran, she looked at the assailant through their mask and could see the colorful burgundy eyes

through the mask. Her heart pounding to no end, Kagami said a prayer and waited for it to be over as she ran and heard the loud explosions of gunfire. She could feel the heat of the metal projectiles zipping past her head and feared at any second one would find her fragile human body. The horror became even more real when a bullet struck the back of the head of a student running next to Kagami and it exploded, coating the right side of Kagami's face and hair red. She barely noticed it as she continued to run in the stampede of students.

The bullets continued to fly past them, some cutting down more of her fellow students until the thinning herd of terrified pupils came to three-pronged fork in the road of different corridors. It was then that any remaining authority from Sakuraba disappeared when the herd split up and went in three different directions as the bullets finally stopped while the assailant reloaded.

Kagami kept running. She ran and ran as she became shorter of breath and began to sweat until she couldn't take it anymore. The wheezing Hiiragi twin stopped and bent over while resting her hands on her knees while breathing deeply. Trying to refill her lungs and calm herself proved to be a herculean task, especially when she wiped the sweat off her head and saw her hand was covered in someone else's blood when she looked at it. She quickly stood and looked around herself, only terrifying her even more when she figured out she was all alone. At least half a dozen students were with her when they split up down the three corridors but now it was only her. She stared down the desolate hallway that was littered with schoolbags and papers from panicked students. It was clear the remaining students ducked into other classrooms to hide and now it was only her in the open.

"I…I need to get out of here…" Kagami whispered to herself as she let a tear slip from fright and her wobbling legs began to carry her through the school again.

All she had in mind was escaping but couldn't stop her brain from replaying the image of the gunman. She could still see the burgundy colors in the killer's eyes as the black-clothed arms raised the powerful military rifle up and aimed it at her and her

friends. Kagami wondered where Misao and Ayano went and prayed that they were okay. It was a mindless slaughter when they turned and ran and she heard a lot of her students fall when they were shot but she kept running. Kagami suddenly felt her knees go numb and she collapsed to the floor and covered her face.

She couldn't contain her anguish and post-traumatic emotions as she cried knowing that this was actually happening to her. To think that this day started out so perfectly and now she sat on her knees covered in blood and crying like a lost child. Her panic consumed her and she began to wish she could've started this day over. If she knew this was going to happen to her, she would've kissed her mother, father, and sisters goodbye. She wanted to kiss her mother goodbye this morning but had to rush out the door since Tsukasa's lack of an early morning routine slowed her down. Kagami suddenly ceased her crying when she remembered the name.

Tsukasa.

Her younger twin sister was still stuck somewhere in the high school. She always vowed to be there and protect her younger sister no matter the danger, even if Konata and Miyuki were with her. That didn't matter to her anymore and even though she could probably find another exit on her own and escape to safety, she felt that she would be betraying her sister. She needed to find Tsukasa. It was the gentle and docile girl's entire being that prompted Kagami to stand on her own feet again and begin to navigate her way through the school despite the ongoing popping sounds of gunfire throughout the school.

Breathing deeply and with clear fright, Hiyori Tamura continued to stay hidden in her bathroom stall with the door locked. She could feel and hear her heart beating like a massive drum as she heard the endless slaughter continue to unfold outside the bathroom. She had already called for help on her phone and was relieved to hear that assistance was already on the way but it still didn't end the heartbreaking sounds of gunfire and screams outside.

As she sat on the toilet while contemplating her next move,

Hiyori continued to think about the text message she had received last night and its relevance to the current shooting at Ryōō High School. The long-haired meganekko had a sinking feeling that it was the person who sent her the message that was responsible for the murderous onslaught that was continuing to unfold outside the bathroom. However, a part of her refused to believe it. Sure, this person had vented their anger to her before and may have said a few strange and even scary things, but never in her worst nightmare would Hiyori actually picture this person acting on what they said. Now she regretted not telling anybody. She saw her friend was upset and saw all the warning signs, yet the friend in her wanted to ignore them for fear of what would happen to her friend if she did tell someone. Now people were dying outside because of it.

As Hiyori continued to feel her endless guilt, the bathroom door suddenly swung open with a bang and the long-haired girl froze and her pounding heart reached new heights when she looked under the stall door and saw a pair of black combat boots slowly enter. The killer was inside the bathroom with her. Hiyori quickly cupped her mouth with her hand and lifted her feet up to avoid detection, though she still feared the killer would hear her loud heartbeat as it grew louder in her chest.

Hiyori watched with trembling eyes at the motionless boots standing only feet away from her and she feared she may have been spotted or have made a noise. The boots continued to stand until they moved again, frightening the long-haired girl as she tried desperately to remain perfectly still. The boots walked over to one of the sinks, making the sound echo in the room and Hiyori slowly moved her head and looked through the crack of the closed door and saw the disguised assailant turn on a sink faucet.

She listened to the water flow into the sink and the assailant to her surprise began to wash their hands. Something on the gunman's hands was annoying enough to get rid of as the hard scrubbing showed. Hiyori couldn't see it, but the assailant was wiping dried blood off their hands and knife before slipping it back into the sheath on the boot. It took a few seconds until the killer's hands were clean again and Hiyori continued to watch the so-called stranger until they turned the faucet off again and casually dried their hands on a paper towel. To Hiyori's relief, the killer threw the used towel away, turned, and began to walk towards the exit.

Hiyori unfortunately celebrated too early and didn't pay attention to her

right foot slipping further off the toilet. It finally fell off the edge and landed on the tile floor with a loud clap, echoing in the bathroom and the black combat boots froze again. Hiyori quickly picked up her foot again and tucked herself tighter and her breathing reached even more towering heights when she saw the boots approach the stall doors. One of the boots lifted up and kicked the farthest stall door open, showing nobody was in it.

The boots moved to the next stall over and once again kicked it open, once again revealing it to be empty. There were six stalls in this woman's bathroom so Hiyori had to think fast. Her stall door was locked but a locked bathroom stall door wasn't going to stop the killer from unleashing a merciless barrage of bullets through it. Hiyori suddenly got an idea and took out her cell phone and quickly yet quietly typed a text message and sent it to the person who texted her to stay away from school.

I'm at school. Please stop this.

Hiyori's two sentence message was sent and the long-haired girl waited as the assailant kicked in the fifth stall door, once again showing nobody was there and her time was up. The assailant began to move to the sixth and final stall where Hiyori was hiding until the chiming of a text message on a phone sounded in the bathroom. The chime came from inside the killer's pocket, making Hiyori gulp as she watched the killer fish into one of the pant pockets to retrieve it.

Oh god…it is my friend.

Silence engulfed the bathroom and Hiyori's sweat across her forehead continued to trickle down her face. She couldn't take her eyes off the two black combat boots only a few feet away from her and she prayed for a way out. She knew who the shooter was and wanted to cry because of it but to her relief, she saw the black combat boots turn again and quickly run out of the bathroom. When she saw the boots exit, Hiyori breathed deeply and screamed in her mind as she slowly left her bathroom stall and approached the bathroom door.

Gently pushing it open, Hiyori looked down the hallways and saw images of pure devastation. She saw dead bodies of her fellow students littering the hallway and puddles of blood joining together and repainting the

floors. The shining brass bullet casings also rolled on the floor and more popping from the killer started nearby and Hiyori knew it was time to leave.

She dashed out of the bathroom and back down the empty freshman corridor again and approached her homeroom. She had to pass the classroom to get to the nearest exit but as she passed it, the faint sound of a young girl crying caught her attention and it was the fact that it sounded familiar that persuaded Hiyori to stop. The long-haired girl slowly approached the open classroom door and peered in, only to find more devastation. Bullet holes riddled the walls, windows were shot out, broken glass littered the floor, along with more bullet casings and to Hiyori's further horror, more dead and bleeding bodies.

She heard the crying again and turned her head to see another truly horrible sight. She saw the crying Yutaka Kobayakawa on her knees with her back facing Hiyori and she was clearly upset over something. Hiyori slowly approached and the long-haired girl's heart sank when she saw Minami Iwasaki stretched out on the floor and barely conscious. The green-haired girl had a look of pure fear as she breathed deeply while holding her left side with her right hand as it continued to spill blood everywhere. The quiet green-haired girl was hit and dying.

Hiyori quickly approached, catching Yutaka's attention and the salmon-haired girl deepened her wails. "T…Tamura-san…!"

The long-haired girl looked around and saw a dead student who was shot in the head and got a cold but still effective idea. She crawled over to him and unbuttoned his uniform top and took it off. She took it back to Minami and held it over the green-haired girl's gunshot wound and took Minami's hands and told her to hold it tight to stop the bleeding.

"Yu-chan, what happened here?" Hiyori asked.

"There…there was a…a person with a…with a gun…he…he shot a student…!" Yutaka continued to cry. "Mi…Minami…! She stood and pushed me…to…the…ground…! She…she took…she took it…for me…!"

Hiyori looked around and noticed another girl from the original group wasn't accounted for. "Where's Patty-chan?"

Yutaka barely heard the question as she sniffed and cried more. "I…I don't…know…! Everyone…tried…to…get out…at the same…time…! I don't know…where she…is!"

Hiyori quickly hugged Yutaka in both an attempt to comfort her and silence her loud wails of sorrow. "Can we carry her out of here?"

Yutaka shook her head. "I tried…! I can't move her without hurting her…!"

"You're going to have to stay here, Minami. I need to get Yutaka out of here but I promise you I'll send help…do you understand?" Hiyori whispered.

Minami looked up and nodded. "Yes…please…get…Yutaka…to safety."

Hiyori nodded.

"But…but what if the gunman comes back…?!" Yutaka choked.

Hiyori sighed as she took Yutaka's hand and stood her up. "It…it's not a gunman that's doing this, Yu-chan. It's a gunwoman."

CHAPTER 3

The scene outside Ryōō High School turned from a casual workday to a crime scene within minutes of the first shots being fired. However, the law enforcement support wasn't exactly what the students had in mind when only three police cars showed up and instead of storming the school, the three police officers began to unroll the yellow police tape around the front of the school. News of the shooting at Ryōō High School was spreading like wildfire around Saitama and a large group of people was beginning to converge onto the school; most of them terrified parents.

As the police continued to setup a perimeter around the school, a woman with long purple hair came running through the growing crowd, her violet eyes throwing tears as her husband tried desperately to stay close. When Miki Hiiragi heard of what was happening at her daughters'

school, her emotions couldn't be contained and her mother's instincts kicked in. She rushed towards the school and wailed again when she heard another shot echo from inside the building.

A policeman stopped her physically as she collided with him while she continued to scream and the other officers continued to unroll the yellow tape. The officer tried to maintain his composure as he said, "Step back, ma'am, this is not a secured area. This is for your safety."

"But my daughters are in there! You have to save them!" Miki cried as she outstretched her arm towards the school, as if she was trying to reach out and grab her twin daughters and reel them into the sanctuary of her grip.

"Ma'am, please! My orders are strictly to secure the area and wait!" The policeman replied and Tadao quickly pulled his wife back as the officer took a step back while Miki still thrashed.

Tadao looked up as he continued to try and restrain his distraught wife. "Wait? Wait for what?!"

"Sir, at this time we are not properly equipped to deal with this kind of situation. Our reports are stating that the assailant is equipped with military weaponry and we were ordered to secure the area and wait for the appropriate units to arrive." The officer replied.

Before Tadao could continue, more blood-curdling shots rang out from inside the school and Miki's meltdown intensified as she dropped to her knees and cried louder. She felt so helpless. Her twin daughters were somewhere in the building in front of her and yet she couldn't rush in and collect them like she wanted to. All she could do was cry as the ongoing popping of automatic gunfire sounded throughout the school and even Tadao yelped when he saw a window on an upper floor explode after a blast of bullets turned it to shards and they rained down onto the schoolyard.

"But our kids are still in there! Are you telling me there's nothing you can do?!" Tadao yelled.

"Sir, my orders are to secure the area by keeping onlookers back and

wait for backup to arrive. I understand your fears but right now the situation inside is too dire for someone like me to touch. I'm just a traffic cop, not a member of the Special Assault Team. Now get back!" The officer commanded and took Tadao by surprise when he physically pushed him back.

"You're letting them kill my babies!" Miki cried as she pounded the concrete sidewalk with her fist as more tears fell from her eyes.

Tadao bent to his knees too and tried his best to comfort his wife as she continued to vent her broken emotions as the policeman took several steps back. Wearing an angry glare on his face, Tadao looked up and shot a horrid glare at the officer, which penetrated into the officer's soul. The head of the Hiiragi household could see the officer was a young man with a golden ring on his left ring finger, telling him he was married and judging by the look on the officer's face, he was a father as well upon seeing Miki's distraught reactions. The officer could feel the Hiiragi's pain and knew this was a parent's worst nightmare; to have their children trapped in a building with an armed killer out for blood.

Gulping at the horrendous sight of a mother crying over her lost and endangered children, the officer turned away and continued to carry out his orders. He was the first to admit that they were worthless orders and they were further endangering the students at Ryōō High School, but he was still expected to uphold them. To find his own closure, he dashed back to his patrol car and got on the radio, wondering where the expected backup was. He tried his best to keep his exterior facial features plain when he was given grim news that the appropriate team to respond to this kind of school shooting would take another two hours. He and any other police units that would arrive on the scene would be given the same orders to sit and wait as the popping inside continued.

Inside the school, a sweating and trembling Misao Kusakabe desperately tried to wipe a blood trail leading to another girl's bathroom with a paper towel. Breathing and panting hard out of fear, Misao continued to look around the hallway and making sure the coast was still clear as she continued to wipe the blood as she walked backwards towards the bathroom door. When her self-appointed task was complete, Misao quickly ducked into the bathroom where the blood trail continued but she disregarded it and sprinted to another stall and opened the door.

Ayano Minegishi was holding her bleeding right side as she cried and

winced in the burning and pulsing pain. "Did…did you…wipe it up?"

Misao nodded as she fetched more paper towels and whispered back with panic. "Yes, I got it all. They won't be able to find us now. How are you doing?"

Breathing deeply, Ayano did her best to respond. "I'm…I'm doing okay. I…I need help."

Misao returned with all the paper towels and bent down to her wounded friend. Fighting the urge to vomit, Misao began to apply pressure with the paper towels over Ayano's bleeding wound. Those ten seconds that continued replaying in Ayano's head like an endless treadmill still stuck with her. The moment they saw the killer round the corner and stare them down and when they turned and ran, Ayano caught one of the bullets in her side during the panic. She was grateful though that Misao was there to catch her and carry her to safety. It only took ten seconds for Ayano to go from healthy and able-bodied to being shot and losing blood, only showing how fast the worst could happen.

"I know but I can't move you just yet." Misao whispered back. "I need to stop this bleeding first. We should count ourselves lucky though. The bullet entered and exited your side cleanly and as far as I can tell it didn't puncture any bones or organs. All we need to do is stop the bleeding then bandage it the best we can and then find help together."

Ayano nodded. "Mi…Misao…thank you…for not…leaving me…"

Misao looked up from her blood-soaked wrists. "Of course. You're my friend. Why would I leave you like that?"

Ayano slowly shook her head, letting drops of sweat fall from her head. "People…are panicking. When people…panic…they…do…bad things…to each other. Friendships…they crumble…thank you…"

Misao slowly nodded. "We've been through a lot. I couldn't just leave you there. We share something, along with Hiiragi."

"You're a good friend…I'm thankful for you." Ayano whispered back with a small smile despite her painful wound.

Before Misao could reply, the growing sounds of running footsteps were heard. They grew louder and someone was quickly approaching the bathroom and Ayano and Misao assumed the worst. The bathroom door suddenly swung open and the two girls held each other tight and closed their eyes as they heard the person quickly close the door behind them. The new person in the bathroom was breathing hard and they could tell it was a female, which perked Misao's curiosity.

She slowly inched her head out the open stall door and to her sudden relief, she saw Patricia Martin resting her body against the door and breathing deeply. She was sweaty, flushed, and bloodspots stained her uniform top.

Misao whispered her name, grabbing the golden-haired girls fearful attention and her eyes were soaked with tears. Her facial features of fright suddenly vanished when she saw Misao and she approached them, wanting to cry in relief.

"Oh thank god it's you…" Patty whispered. "We need to get out of here. There's blood and bodies everywhere outside…!"

"Be quiet!" Misao hushed her with a hiss. "We know that but Ayano is hurt. I need to stop her bleeding before we can go anywhere so grab more towels and help me plug her wound."

Patty quickly heeded Misao's command and grabbed the last of the paper towels from the dispenser and returned to the bloody scene. She assisted the best way she knew how in stopping the bleeding as Ayano continued to wince and whimper in the searing pain. Her whole body felt hot as she continued to sweat and felt her wound leak more blood.

"It…it all started in our homeroom. Someone came in and just…started shooting." Patty whispered in a quivering voice. "Do…do you know where…Minami or Yutaka are…?"

Misao shook her head. "No. We were so close of making it out of here. Then that psycho cut us off and opened fire on us and there was a panic. We got separated from Hiiragi in the scramble. Have you seen her?"

Patty shook her head. "No."

"Pa…patty…" Ayano whispered. "Wa…water…please."

The golden-haired girl nodded and returned to the bathroom sink. Though she had no cup with her, she had to use her hands to collect the water and she returned as quickly as possible. Using her hands as a cup, Patty titled them on Ayano's lips and she drank the small amount of water while Misao continued to try and stop the bleeding wound.

"Whoever's doing this is really packing. Who's doing this? Some sort of disgruntled soldier or cop or a terrorist?" Misao whispered and to her relief she saw she was beginning to make progress in stopping Ayano's bleeding. "I saw the guns this guy is using and aren't they illegal unless you're a cop or soldier? This doesn't make any sense."

"I don't know who's doing this." Patty whispered back. "The only thing I saw before I pushed my way out of the classroom was the shooter was pretty short, about our height so I don't think it was a soldier. But I still have a hard time believing a student is doing all of this. If it is, then where did they get those guns?"

Misao shook her head. "That's not important now. We need to focus on getting out of here and getting Ayano to safety."

Her muscle power almost depleted, Konata carried one final desk to the barricaded classroom door and propped it up against the rest. A massive wall of student desks, chairs, and other items were forced against the door, showing Miyuki had assumed her role as default leader and made her decision. Tsukasa, Konata and she were going to follow the principal's earlier words and barricade themselves in their classroom and wait for help to arrive. It now seemed like a logical decision to them after hearing all the students in Kuroi's classroom getting mowed down by automatic gunfire when their panic consumed them. They knew the closest school exit to their classroom was on the other side of the hallway and it seemed too big of a risk, considering they had no idea where the killer was.

"Okay, that should do it." Konata whispered as she wiped sweat off her eyebrows and took several steps back, careful not to step on their teacher's body.

The blue-haired girl turned back and saw Tsukasa's crying had calmed down a bit but she was still in need of continuous comfort from Miyuki, who still held her in her arms. Knowing that Tsukasa needed more reassurance, Konata joined Miyuki in comforting the younger Hiiragi twin.

"We're gonna make it out of here, Tsukasa." Konata whispered and patted her head.

Tsukasa lifted her watery face. "I…I…I want…my…sis…! She's…she's out…there…!"

Miyuki gently hushed the crying girl. "Now, now, don't you worry about a thing, Tsukasa-san. Your sister is a strong and resilient young woman. I'm sure she's just fine right now."

Konata grinned. "You know it, Tsukasa. If anything, Kagamin has probably already made that shooter her bitch right now and has him begging for mercy."

It made Konata and Miyuki feel better when they saw a faint but still existent smile tug at Tsukasa's mouth as she wiped another tear away. She sounded a light giggle but quickly quieted herself and cradled further into Miyuki's hug when more popping echoed throughout the school. The three girls hugged each other tighter in ongoing attempts to keep each other together, as if they were all fractured and on the verge of shattering, which ironically was exactly how they felt when they saw their teacher murdered in front of them.

They tried to remain quiet as a disturbing silence fell upon the school. The screaming had ceased for the most part and the only noise they could hear was the sirens of the police cars and approaching ambulances outside. They were still oblivious to the fact that they were all alone in terms of help coming to get them any time soon. Every now and then they would hear a scream from another student stuck in the hallways until it would either fade as it ran away, or another gunshot would silence it. Their only companion was the ticking of the classroom clock, but even that was considered a double-edged sword. Every second that passed was another second closer to the end of this horrifying ordeal, but it also meant one more second they were still stuck in the school with this

lunatic.

Hearing the galloping of running students approach their door made the three frightened girls huddle closer. Tsukasa nearly screamed again when they saw someone on the other side desperately trying to open their door but Konata's barricade hindered that. It was followed by even more terrified voices on the other side.

"Let us in, please!" A male student's voice pleaded with clear panic in his voice.

"Please, the killer is right behind us!" A female student's voice added. "Please open the door or we're going to die!"

The three girls inadvertently remained silent and curled together at the back of the classroom. The students outside however knew people were in there because of the barricade as the male student continued to try and open the door as the shifting blockade showed. Tsukasa slowly turned her head towards the door as she heard the female student outside make another plea for their lives. The innocent and caring persona inside the youngest Hiiragi daughter prompted her to inhale a breath in a plan to say she was coming over to help them. Konata's hand however suddenly cupped her mouth and Tsukasa looked at her blue-haired friend.

Konata had rising fear in her eyes with a facial expression that complemented it as she quickly shook her head no. She didn't want Tsukasa to help them. Seeing this frigid and heartless gesture by the blue-haired girl shocked and disturbed the kindhearted Tsukasa Hiiragi. She was a girl that could never turn anybody's request for help down and anyone could imagine her flaring emotions when she was being denied a chance to save two people's lives. Still, Konata held Tsukasa back and shot a face at Miyuki that also told her to stay quiet.

"Please, we don't want to die! We beg you, please help us!" The male student cried. "Our group was separated when the killer shot at us so we need to hide!"

Tsukasa once again tried to stand and help the two desperate strangers outside but Konata physically grabbed the youngest Hiiragi twin and forced her against the wall as they continued to sit. She put more pressure on her hand covering Tsukasa's mouth and held her other finger

to her mouth, telling her to keep quiet while still shaking her head. Miyuki also wanted to assist the students but saw Konata's reasoning and concluded that she was unfortunately right in her actions given the circumstances they were force into.

"Oh god here he comes!" The female student cried and the three girls inside the classroom could hear the stampeding of the students' feet as they ran away.

Suddenly, two gunshots erupted right outside the classroom and then there was silence. The three girls cringed with both shots and Konata could feel tears rolling over her hand from Tsukasa's eyes. Breathing hard but quietly, the three girls listened with fear as they heard the footsteps of the killer's boots through the wall outside and their hearts continued to beat wildly when they saw the barricade begin to shift again as another person was trying to get in. They waited and prayed and fortunately for them, the killer quickly lost interest and began walking away.

Breathing sighs of relief, Konata slowly removed her hand from Tsukasa's mouth and the youngest Hiiragi daughter whimpered, "Why…?"

"Because things are different now, Tsukasa. We can't afford to help anyone anymore. We're not capable of saving everyone that's still trapped out there and if we tried, we would only lose our lives in the process. The people out there are scared and panicking and when that sets in, they became just as dangerous, if not more so than the killer out there and would throw us into the bullets without a second thought if it meant they could survive." Konata whispered with remorse.

"I beg pardon, but Konata-san is right. When people are panicking, they become impulsive and irrational and they would've only endangered our lives, even if we did save them. I know it sounds horrible and evil, but that's just the way it is. We now need to remain isolated and quiet." Miyuki whispered with deep regret and turned away. "Our only responsibility from here on out needs to be to keep each other alive and stay close with each other. That is the only way we will survive."

Konata nodded. "She's right. The three of us share a connection that we need to protect until the very end. There's something special between us

that's going to get us out of here alive."

Tsukasa wiped her eyes. "You, you mean our friendship is going to help us survive, Kona-chan?"

Konata nodded. "Tsukasa, I just wanted to tell you that I've always treasured our friendship and we all share a special bond. I knew it from the first day I met you and Kagami that we were going to be great friends and the same goes with Miyuki. There's something truly special about all of us and I promise you that I will get you out of here so you and Kagami can stay together."

"Please do not lose faith, Tsukasa-san. Like I said, we need to stick close and rely on each other." Miyuki added with feminine sincerity and hugged Tsukasa tighter, as did Konata.

"I felt that way, too, Kona-chan…and Yuki-chan." Tsukasa whispered. "This whole time…you two have been my best friends and have done so much for me. Up until high school, Kagami was one of my only friends because of my shy and docile ways. But when I met you two…everything became so much better. You brought out so much good in me that I never knew I had and I always wanted us to stay friends forever."

"We will, Tsukasa-san." Miyuki whispered. "We'll stay friends today, tomorrow, the next day, into college, into our careers, everything."

Tsukasa smiled again and took a deep breath. Unbeknownst to her, a new and incredible strength was beginning to blossom. She suddenly began telling herself that she was going to survive like it was a fact and not a hope.

I will survive this. I will survive this. And so will all my friends. We're going to live through this together…because we are connected.

Still keeping a tight grip on Yutaka's hand, Hiyori continued to guide the frightened and crying girl through the hallway to safety. Yutaka kept her eyes closed as they passed more bodies bathing in puddles of blood while also stepping and kicking empty bullet casings on the floor. Hiyori tried her best to explain what was happening at their school to Yutaka but the young girl still couldn't wrap her mind around this tragic onslaught.

"But…but I still don't…understand…" Yutaka sniffed while still thinking about Minami and how she was forced to leave her alone. "Why would she do this? If…if she comes…from that kind…of background? I just don't understand…!"

Hiyori nodded and tightened her soft grip on Yutaka's petite hand. "I know it sounds crazy but it's true. It just goes to show that everyone has their breaking point no matter whom they are or where they come from. I just wish I read the handwriting on the wall and reported it but the friend in me didn't want to see it. I wanted to believe that she was just venting."

"You cannot blame yourself for this, Tamura-san. No one could've predicted that it would come to this." Yutaka said as she began to calm down at last. "Let's just get out of here and bring back help for Minami and you'll be able to settle your guilt when this is all over. Remember… we need to make sure we bring plenty of paramedics and police with us…! Minami needs to survive…! She just has to…!"

Hiyori nodded and continued walking Yutaka through the school and they neared the closest exit. Despite Yutaka's kind words, she still blamed herself for what was happening to her school and her fellow students. Even though they never truly had to live with the threat of a school shooting unlike other places, every student at Ryōō High School was taught to report any suspicious activity or anything that could be interpreted as a threat to the school's staff. Since Hiyori lapsed in this judgment because she didn't want to believe it herself, all of this happening.

"Freeze." A ruffled female voice suddenly said from behind them, the voice being muffled by a black ski mask.

The following noise that echoed behind Hiyori and Yutaka suddenly sent shockwaves of terror that penetrated every fiber of their bodies and made them nearly pass out. It was the metal clicking of mechanisms inside a firearm loading a fresh magazine of bullets into the barrel of the gun. Yutaka and Hiyori froze and they feared their time was up when they heard the sound of black combat boots stepping closer behind them after the voice commanded its request. Both of them breathed hard while Yutaka readied herself to cry again as she tightened her grip on Hiyori's hand, as if it was her way of saying goodbye to her friend.

Hiyori however remained as calm as she could be and hoped there was still a way to stop this slaughter. She gulped as the boot steps grew louder and closer and whispered, "Yutaka, don't make a sound. Stay perfectly still and don't run. Let me take care of this."

Yutaka's only audible response was a whimper as more tears slid down her face and splashed on the bloody floor. Her breathing became deeper and louder as more sweat trickled down her face and mixed with her tears and the blood on the floor. She continued to stare forward and suddenly felt the presence of another human standing directly behind them but she was too scared to even consider turning around let alone run away.

The boots suddenly stopped and silence fell between the three Ryōō High School students. It was part of the killer's mind games; to remain perfectly quiet as the assailant watched the next two potential victims quiver and tremble in fright. Breathing hard, Hiyori nearly lost control of her bodily functions when she felt the cold steel of the front of the rifle barrel press against the back of her head.

"I told you to stay away from school today, Hiyorin. Now look at what not listening is going to get you. To think…you were the only one I wanted to live today." A ruffled female voice said behind them with zero emotions.

The assailant moved her finger to the trigger and began to squeeze.

CHAPTER 4

Running out of patience, sanity, and breath, Kagami continued to search the hallways for her lost sister. She remembered when her group was shot at and separated, she ran down a corridor to a part of the school she had never been to before and remembered an old conversation she had with Tsukasa, Konata, and Miyuki about this. Now she felt more upset remembering the conversation and wished she had truly established a layout of the entire school in her mind. Kagami however was still smart enough to know that she couldn't keep focusing on that or she would truly lose her mind. Instead, she focused all her attention on finding Tsukasa.

Kagami came to another corner and carefully looked around it and down the long corridor. It was empty and desolate with scattered school supplies all over the floor and to her relief, no bodies, blood, or bullet casings anywhere. The killer had clearly not found this hallway yet and she began to slowly make her trek down the disturbingly quiet hallway. Kagami wanted to intensify her search for Tsukasa but at the same time was too scared to run for fear of the sounds of her shoes echoing across the hallway would attract the killer.

As she maneuvered through the hallway at a quickened pace, she still had no idea which part of the large building she was in. The last time she peered into an empty classroom it turned out to be an art room so she assumed she was still in that general area. Kagami also noticed that the gunfire that had echoed throughout the school ever since she escaped the killer had been quiet for a long time. Hopefully it meant that the shooting spree was over or the police had finally stormed the school. It could also mean the killer had finally given up and took their own life, which was how a lot of school shootings usually ended.

Kagami approached another room and slid the door open. Peering into the darkness of it, she whispered, "Tsukasa…? Tsukasa…are you in here?"

Nobody responded and Kagami turned away from the door to continue her search. As she tiptoed through the desolate hallway, she could hear the sirens of emergency vehicles outside and they were becoming more numerous. As Kagami continued to walk through the hallway, she neared a large panel of windows that would allow her to view the outside world as the sun's rays shined through.

She looked out the window and saw scenes of pure chaos three floors below her on the schoolyard. A trail of yellow tape surrounded the school while keeping a massive collection of people back and separated from the bloodbath on the schoolyard. Dozens of students were stretched out on stretchers and bleeding as paramedics jumped from student to student in desperate efforts to stabilize them before they could take them to hospitals. Kagami could also see more students finally making their way out of the school, some carrying each other as they bled and cried. She lifted her eyes up and saw the massive population of onlookers continuing to grow and she wondered if her parents were among them. If they were, in a way Kagami was grateful she was in the school instead of being forced to see their parents fret over her and Tsukasa.

Another thought suddenly crossed Kagami's mind as she watched the crowd three stories below her. What if Tsukasa somehow made it out already and she was safe? What would be the better decision for Kagami; to roll the dice and assume Tsukasa made it out and give up her search for her and find a way out, or roll the dice again and continue searching for her sister who may not even be in the school anymore but the killer maybe? It didn't take long for Kagami to conclude that she couldn't take the risk of leaving her sister behind. Even if she was already outside, Kagami wouldn't feel satisfied until every square inch of the school was searched for her.

Kagami approached another corner as she neared the end of the hallway. Feeling like a rat trapped in a maze, the only thing she could do was keep following the corridor wherever it took her in hopes of finding Tsukasa and hopefully the others. She was so focused on keeping herself quiet, she didn't realize another human being was approaching her at the corner she neared. Kagami looked at her watch and concluded that only fifteen minutes had passed since she first got separated from her group yet it seemed like two hours had passed. She hated being alone on a normal day so anyone could imagine how much she hated her current situation; being stuck in her high school alone with an armed killer and her sister was missing.

The twin-tailed girl rounded the corner and collided with another human body, instantly taking away her conservative coolheaded nature and she screamed. Her scream echoed throughout the school as she thought she had collided with the person who had already ruthlessly slaughtered so many of her fellow classmates. As she screamed and thrashed to get away, she felt a smaller hand reach up, cover her mouth, and force her against the wall as she continued to struggle.

It took a few seconds for Kagami to register the person who was trying to silence her but it suddenly clicked. Hikaru Sakuraba was holding her homeroom student against the wall with her one hand over Kagami's mouth and her other telling her to shush with her finger over her lip. Even though Kagami saw who it was, she still screamed lightly because of her rattled nerves until she was finally able to silence herself but Sakuraba still held her hand over the twin-tailed girl's mouth. She held it for a few more seconds until she saw Kagami was calm enough to withdraw it and when she did, Kagami remained silent but breathed hard.

"I…I thought you were…the killer." Kagami whispered as she trembled in fear.

"And I thought you were smart enough to get the hell out of here a long time ago." Sakuraba snapped. "What the hell are you still doing in here, Hiiragi?"

"I…I can't find my sister, Tsukasa. Please tell me that you saw her escape." Kagami pleaded quietly.

Sakuraba shook her head. "Ever since our group was separated I've been trying to evacuate students hiding in classrooms and to be perfectly honest Hiiragi, I don't remember what she looks like. I've only seen her one other time and that was at your entrance ceremony when you were both freshmen."

Kagami nodded. "I'm trying to find her but I have no idea where she is."

Sakuraba suddenly took Kagami by her wrist. "Well you can say hello to her again when I get you out of here."

The homeroom teacher began to guide Kagami through the hallway and Kagami whispered, "Where are we going?"

"We're going on a date." Sakuraba replied quickly and sarcastically. "Where do you think we're going? I'm getting you out of here."

"But my sister…!" Kagami hissed as she reluctantly followed her teacher.

"I said I don't know where she is so we're just going to have to take a chance and hope she made it outside." Sakuraba bit back again as she continued to pull Kagami.

As they took various right and left turns throughout the corridors, Kagami struggled to make a decision. She wanted to find a way out and live to see tomorrow, but she still thought about Tsukasa. Her younger twin sister wasn't as strong as she was, either physically and especially not mentally and Kagami knew Tsukasa didn't have would it took to

survive something as horrible as this. She couldn't prove it but she was convinced that Tsukasa was still somewhere in the school; her sisterly intuition was on fire regarding this thought.

"Ms. Sakuraba…I can't leave!" Kagami exclaimed.

"What are you talking about, Hiiragi?!" Sakuraba snarled while still pulling Kagami. "We need to get you out of here so stop making a fuss already!"

Before Kagami could object again, she looked around her surroundings and suddenly knew where she was. She was in an area of the school near the freshmen hallway and she would have to go through it to get to Kuroi's classroom. It was then that Kagami's defensive temper flared and she halted her teacher by putting on her brakes and she quickly pulled her hand out of Sakuraba's grip. The sudden movement stopped Sakuraba and she nearly confronted Kagami again with a temper until the twin-tailed girl beat her to it.

"Now listen to me goddamn it! My sister is still in here and I'm the only one who can find her and protect her! Now you can either help me find her or you can keep running around this school but come hell or high water I am going to find Tsukasa and carry her out of here myself if I have to!" Kagami roared so loudly that Sakuraba looked around for fear of the killer hearing.

Seeing that Kagami was serious on this issue, Sakuraba sighed. Hikaru Sakuraba was an only child growing up and couldn't honestly say she knew the bond that Kagami felt for Tsukasa, but at the same time she could still respect it. She wished Kagami the best of luck and to stay safe and the two quickly parted their ways. Sakuraba disappeared around another corner of the school while Kagami turned and started running again. Her strength had returned upon believing her sister may have been close as she continued to run for another two minutes without missing a single beat. Her heart became louder and thumbed harder when the corridors began to refill with empty bullet casings, blood stains, and ultimately dead bodies on the floors.

She finally arrived at the freshmen hallway and unbeknownst to her, the classroom where it all started. The classroom of Yutaka, Minami, Hiyori, and Patricia. She was motivated by curiosity as she approached the

classroom's open and bullet-riddled door, praying that she wouldn't recognize any of the bodies as she stepped in. Maybe Yutaka was inside hiding and she could help Konata out by keeping her close and protecting her as well. Kagami entered the classroom and saw utter and sickening carnage. Bodies were torn by multiple gunshot wounds and she looked around the room as she felt her stomach churn from the grotesque scene before her. Bodies were scattered over the floor, desks were overturned and thrown everywhere, windows were shot out, and bullet casings rolled on the floor, creating ominous ringing sounds. The whole room also smelt of gunpowder and smoke in addition to the smell of death itself. To her relief, Kagami didn't find anyone she recognized from this class. She looked throughout the entire classroom and eventually navigated to the back of the room and found a single blood-soaked uniform top crumbled in a ball, but no one either in it or using it to plug a wound.

Unbeknownst to Kagami, she was standing at the exact same spot where the wounded Minami Iwasaki was only a few minutes ago. The green-haired girl was using the crumbled uniform top as a means to stop her bleeding, but now she was gone and also somewhere loose in the school and still mortally wounded. Of course, Kagami didn't know any of this as she turned and left ground zero of the school shooting to continue her quest to find Tsukasa.

She could not only feel her heart pounding like a drum, she could feel Yutaka's thumping pulse in her tight grip as it held on to her hand. Their two hands continued to sweat and mix together as Hiyori could still feel the rifle barrel pressing against the back of her head. She shifted her eyes down and to the right to look at Yutaka, who was keeping her eyes clenched shut as endless streams of water fell from them while she trembled uncontrollably.

Remembering the promise she gave to Minami to protect the frail little girl, Hiyori gulped and cleared her throat. "Why are you doing this? It's me…Hiyorin. Remember all the good times we had? All the laughs and memories we used to share? Why are you doing all of these horrible things?"

The female killer suddenly halted her trigger finger and moved it away. Her mask still muffling her voice, "If you have to ask me why I'm doing this, then you've just given me all the reasons in the world why I should paint this hallway with your brains right now. You know why I'm doing this."

Hiyori sighed with the rifle barrel still digging into her long dark hair. "You're right. It was stupid of me to say that. I'm sorry everything for you had to come to this. I knew you were suffering. I knew you were being bullied. I knew you were under incredible pressure from your parents to give up your secret passions and live the way they wanted you to. None of that was fair."

"You're damn right none of it was fair!" She yelled and put more pressure on the back of Hiyori's head, only furthering Yutaka's panic. "It was never fair and nobody understood me…! Except for you. You were the only one who ever got me and accepted me in all regards. I don't want to kill you, Hiyorin, but you've given me no choice."

"But before you do, please tell me a few things. Why are you shooting people who don't even know your name? What did those innocent people do to you?" Hiyori bravely continued, still facing forward. "What about Yutaka Kobayakawa standing right next to me? She never even knew you existed until I told her it was you that was doing all of this. So let's just talk about this for a minute."

The assailant paused while keeping the rifle barrel nestled against Hiyori's head. "You want to know the truth? I'll tell you…then…I will kill you. The truth is…every…single…motherfucker…at this school is fake…and they know it. I know this…because I was fake once. People here are fake…so they stay with their cliques to hide it. Some of the pieces of filth here have everything handed to them on a silver platter in their social cliques. Some never have to worry about things like making impressions, working for respect, or building friendships…but that is a double-edged sword. They have everything…yet they have nothing. Because they never had to work for anything, they're afraid of one day stepping into the real world because they know it won't be as kind to them. So…they seek out people like me. People who have…specific interests…that others don't understand…but that's not why they targeted me. They targeted me…because I unlike them know who I am. I was an otaku…and I was proud of it. It was my confidence in myself that they were petrified of…so they had to destroy it for me upsetting their delicate balance of the school's social hierarchy. In the end…they won. But in the end…they also lost. Because of the endless torment…the ongoing harassment…the never-ending practical jokes and public humiliation…this is what they have all brought onto themselves. At the end of the day…nobody here is worth remembering."

Hiyori gulped, knowing exactly how she felt and what she was saying. She knew this…because she was there too at one point. Hearing her former friend moving her finger back to the trigger, Hiyori quickly said, "You are."

The gunwoman froze again. "Wh…what was that?"

"I said you are. You are worth remembering…Izumi Wakase." Hiyori identified the person who was terrorizing Ryoo High School as she stood behind Hiyori, her face still masked and still pointing the rifle in its deadly direction. "I remember how you always held yourself to such a higher standard than the rest of us otakus…but only because you were expected to like you said, especially when you became class president. Yet you still wanted to chase your own dreams and passions, proving that you were hell-bent on being your own person. You refused to bow to the norms of this conventional establishment despite the odds that were stacked up against you. You're an idol in the otaku culture…and to me…Izumi."

Hiyori's words were beginning to sink in and the long-haired otaku could feel the rifle barrel beginning to tremble behind her. She felt even more relief when the rifle barrel was retracted out of her thick hair and away from her head. More silence engulfed them as Izumi Wakase took a step back and Hiyori wanted to say more to her to get her to stop but she knew the ball was in her court now. Only she could stop this pointless violence that had claimed so many innocent lives already.

"Get on your knees, Hiyori." Izumi quickly commanded, still with no emotion in her voice.

Hiyori's heart sped up again and she wanted to cry. "But…Izumi…"

"I told you. I said I'd tell you the truth…and then I would kill you. Now get on your knees." Izumi added coldly.

Yutaka couldn't take it any longer and she began to loudly vent her broken emotions. She released Hiyori's hand and covered her face as she cried. Yutaka cried for her parents, for Konata, and especially for Minami. She knew that if Hiyori was going to be killed, she would be next and she could already feel her physical health beginning to deteriorate as she cried.

Hiyori saw this and tried her best to keep Minami's request to keep Yutaka safe alive. "Izumi…I will let you kill me…but only on one condition. Let Yu-chan go. I promised her friend that you shot that I would get her to safety. Please…from one friend to another…do me this favor by letting her go. She's not a part of this."

Yutaka didn't even hear the request from Hiyori over her own wails over her potential upcoming death and sorrow. She did however hear the killer voice her response to the request after several more seconds of silence. Yutaka stopped when she heard Izumi Wakase say, "Fine…I'll let the little one go. You…get lost!"

Yutaka turned back to the Ryoo High School shooter for the first time and trembled more in fear upon seeing the black tactical clothing and weaponry. Her knees buckled and she thought she was going to wet herself seeing the massive assault rifle pointing at the back of Hiyori's head. Hiyori however continued to take everything in stride as she glanced down at Yutaka.

"Okay, Yu-chan. Get out of here." Hiyori ordered with confidence in her voice.

"But…but Tamura-san…" Yutaka sniffed as she looked at her friend with crying eyes.

Hiyori shook her head. "You can't stay, Yu-chan. I promised Minami I would get you to safety so fulfill her wish. Get yourself out of here and no matter what you hear after you leave…don't look or turn back. Do you understand?"

Still crying, Yutaka covered her face and quickly nodded. Following Hiyori's instructions and fulfilling Minami's wish, the short and terrified Yutaka activated her legs and she began to run down the long hallway, fighting the urge to look back at Hiyori. Her biggest fear was hearing a gunshot echo behind her as she ran but to her relief, the silence still remained as Yutaka rounded a final corner and dashed for the exit and could see the flashing lights of police cars and ambulances. She pushed the doors open and she was free.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Hiyori smiled lightly knowing she had satisfied

what she thought was Minami's dying wish.

"On your knees, Hiyori Tamura." Izumi ordered coldly.

Nodding, Hiyori slowly sank to her knees and once again felt the cold metal of the rifle barrel dig into her hair again. Hiyori took a breath and said, "Before you kill me, I just wanted to say I'm sorry."

Silence followed until the masked Izumi Wakase replied. "Sorry? Why are you apologizing to me?"

"Because I failed you as a friend. You're a sick young girl, Izumi. I should've reported you to the teachers or the police…but I didn't want them to take you away from me or Patty or our other friends." Hiyori said as she continued to rest on her knees with the assault rifle pointing at her head. "The blood of these students is on my hands as much as yours. Believe it or not, I know exactly how you feel…because I've been in your spot before. I've drawn my own plans and I've even looked around at different guns so I know what it feels like to believe you have no way out. It was this likeminded thinking that hindered me from seeing the handwriting on the wall and made me ignore facts…because you are me…and I am you. So when you kill me…you'll be killing a part of yourself. So once again…I'm sorry Izumi Wakase…for not being the better friend to you. I hope you can forgive me."

Hiyori closed her eyes and waited for it to be over. She never expected this to be her ending and she didn't know how it would feel to have a bullet part her head open. She just hoped that it would be like in movies and it would be quick and painless. Still feeling the rifle buried in her hair, she tightened her eyes shut as hard as she could.

Suddenly, the rifle barrel slowly retracted from her head and she heard Izumi Wakase's voice suddenly flood with emotion when she whispered, "Hiyori…look at me."

Hiyori slowly turned her head and to her sudden shock, her face was met with the stock of the rifle as it was swung down and it made sharp contact with her face. The brutal impact from the weapon's solid rear broke her glasses and nose while also forming a gut-wrenching bruise across her face. The physical attack was vicious as she fell to the bloody floor and bled from her nose and mouth as she winced in pain. As she slowly began

to lose consciousness, Izumi Wakase slowly bent down to her.

"You're lucky, Hiyorin. You have both a way with manga…and with words." Izumi whispered. "But before I go and while you're still awake, I thought I would share one more secret with you. I brought something else to school with me today besides the weapons you see now. There's a bomb in the school."

More fear surfaced in Hiyori's twitching eyes as she rested on the floor and her body became numb.

"Yes, Hiyori, there was more in that duffle bag than my guns. In one hour, an explosion so massive will tear half of this school apart and turn everything in it to ashes." Izumi said as she looked through her mask at her wincing friend. "It's amazing what you can find on the Internet nowadays. Making bombs is so…simple. Anyway…I hid it in a special place…the senior hall. There were a lot of barricaded doors up there so there are plenty of students still there that will disappear in a massive fireball. So with that said…see you in the next life, Hiyorin."

Hiyori's eyelids became heavier when she saw Izumi Wakase rise to her feet again and begin to walk away. Though Hiyori didn't know it as she began to lose consciousness from the massive blow to her head, Izumi had walked through the senior hall earlier and simply testing the doors of each classroom to see if they were barricaded, which plenty were. One of them housed Konata, Tsukasa, and Miyuki. The three frightened and hiding girls had barricaded themselves on the same floor where a massive bomb was continuing to tick closer to detonation.

The blow to Hiyori's head finally consumed her when she closed her eyelids, throwing her into a world of darkness and she went unconscious.

CHAPTER 5

The time continued to crawl at a painfully slow pace. There wasn't anything to take their minds off what was happening outside and Konata, Tsukasa, and Miyuki continued to huddle together at the back of their classroom. Though the time continued to slowly tick away, they couldn't help but notice the gunfire had ceased awhile ago and maybe it was all over. Tsukasa was still naïve when it came to things like this, but Miyuki and Konata were smart enough to know that school

shootings usually ended with the assailant turning the gun on themselves.

"We…we haven't heard anything for awhile." Tsukasa whispered. "No one else has come by and we haven't heard any more screams or gunfire. I think it might be over so I say we have a look."

Konata shook her head. "It's too much of a risk, Tsukasa. For all we know, whoever's doing this is just waiting outside for someone to stick their heads out so he can pop em'."

"But we haven't heard anything for so long already. We haven't heard any gunfire or screaming ever since those last two people. I think it's over. We have to take a peek and see." Tsukasa asserted herself and she startled Konata and Miyuki when she stood and was about to make a dash for the door.

Konata quickly grabbed Tsukasa by her uniform and pulled her back and she suddenly snapped. She cried loudly for Konata to release her and began to thrash and cause a ruckus, frightening Miyuki as well. She too stood and grabbed Tsukasa as she once again went into a panic attack and began to scream and flail while Konata and Miyuki desperately tried to silence her. Konata tried to keep her mouth covered while Miyuki held her around her stomach and shoulders while Tsukasa began kicking.

"Tsukasa, stop! Stop it already! Stop it!" Konata cried with extreme anxiety.

It was no use. Tsukasa had been sitting too long and with too many uncertainties bouncing around inside her head until they all exploded. Not knowing if the attack on Ryoo High School was still ongoing or if it had ended, whether Kagami was safe or not, her parents pulling their hair out worrying about them, when help would finally arrive, and especially having no choice but to stare at Nanako Kuroi's pale and lifeless body with her still basting in a pool of drying blood.

"I want out! I want out! I want out!" Tsukasa screamed loudly. "Let me out of here! I don't want to die in this room! I want

Kagami! I want my mommy! Let me out...!"

She's not going to stop until we're all dead...we might have to...

Konata shook the vile thought from her mind as she didn't want to become like the rest of the cutthroats out there that had already clawed over each other if it meant safety. No matter what, Konata was going to exhaust all her resources to make sure Tsukasa would stay alive for Kagami. The twin-tailed girl meant a lot to Konata after all. A lot.

Suddenly, Tsukasa wedged free of Miyuki's grasp and broke free. She ran to the barricade and began to rip it apart as her panic consumed her and she began to lose all contact with reality as she threw a chair at Konata and Miyuki, who were quick to dodge it. The two girls quickly pulled Tsukasa back again while her mental collapse continued relentlessly.

Miyuki, now fearing all their lives were in danger, took it to a step nobody had seen from the gentle pink-haired girl before. She wrapped her arms around Tsukasa's flat stomach, lifted her up, and dropped both their bodies to the hard floor and Konata quickly pounced on top and once again covered Tsukasa's mouth. By this point, the once docile and innocent Hiiragi twin was depleted of energy and could only cry silently on the floor.

What suddenly halted her crying was a noise that sounded throughout the school in every room at once. The dinging of the school bell sounded throughout the large complex and its chimes calmed Tsukasa down for reasons not even she could comprehend. It was like the bell in a professional boxing match signaling the end of a round. The bells were on a timer so it didn't matter what was happening in or around the school so they chimed despite the shooting. The three girls continued to rest on the floor in their body pile until Konata sighed.

"It's 10:30. Where should you be by now, Tsukasa?" The blue-haired girl whispered, not knowing what else to say or ask.

Tsukasa slowly wiped her eyes. "English class. I was actually starting to get better at that class, too. I thought that maybe one

day…I could hold a conversation with a foreigner. Maybe even date one and see the world with him."

Konata nodded. "I would be in math. I'm glad I'm not there right now."

Miyuki and Tsukasa couldn't help but giggle.

"Yuki-chan, where would you be by now?" Tsukasa whispered.

"I would be in P.E. class. Today we were going to do the 300 meter sprint and I must confess; I was nervous about doing it. Running that fast with my glasses bouncing on my face…and if they fell off in the middle of the race. It would be so embarrassing." Miyuki smiled.

Konata sighed again. "Even with the situation we're in, I'm still jealous of you, Miyuki."

Hearing the old sentiment from Konata prompted Tsukasa to smile a bit until she sighed. "I'm sorry, everyone. I just…I just want to go home. I'm scared, I'm tired…I just want all of this to be over."

Still resting on the floor, Miyuki sighed and hugged Tsukasa again. "We know, Tsukasa-san, we know and it's okay. We're all tired and scared and we all want this to be over. But we cannot lose ourselves during this trying time. We need to stick together and feed off each other's strengths."

More silence fell between the three girls as they continued to rest on the floor. They didn't know what to do at this point so the only thing that seemed to make any sense was to remain quiet after Tsukasa's meltdown. The next noise that came was the sudden and loud chopping of a helicopter's rotor blades and the flying machine zoomed over the school.

"I wonder if that's a news helicopter." Miyuki whispered. "All eyes are most certainly on us by this point. A school shooting of this scale…and in our country…I bet everyone around the globe

is watching us right now."

"What if it's a police helicopter?" Konata asked.

"That's also possible…though I fail to see what good a police helicopter would do us at this point. I don't think it would be rational for them to land police on the roof as if we were in a war." Miyuki replied.

Konata pulled herself to her feet and slowly walked to the windows. She peeked out the glass panels and turned back to Miyuki and replied, "Take a look, Miyuki. I think we are at war."

Curious by the blue-haired girl's observation, Miyuki pulled herself to her feet and helped Tsukasa to hers and quietly joined Konata at the window. Tsukasa remained behind the safety of Miyuki as the pink-haired girl kept a grip on Tsukasa's hand as she walked over to the window. When Miyuki looked below, she couldn't help but gasp at the anarchic scenes that continued to unfold all around the school.

The small numbers of policemen were having trouble keeping the increasingly restless and large crowd under control. So many concerned parents, friends, and bystanders were demanding answers as to why the police were still simply standing outside as the attack continued to go on. If the backup didn't arrive soon, it was going to get just as ugly outside as it was inside. News vans and crew were already reporting the story of the Ryoo High School shooting as nearly a dozen cameras and reporters were standing in front of the school, blocked by the yellow tape. However, they couldn't see any dead or wounded students from their position relative to where Kagami was at one point. Hopefully the results of the shooting weren't as bad as they feared, though they regrettably couldn't be more wrong.

"I never thought something this horrible could happen here. I cannot even begin to imagine what was going through the mind of the perpetrator when they decided to carry out this horrendous attack." Miyuki whispered as she turned away from the mass chaos out the window.

"No one ever thinks it'll happen to them…until it does." Konata replied as she too was overwhelmed by the pandemonium outside and backed away. "However…I think I might have an idea why this is going on."

Miyuki and Tsukasa glanced at Konata. "You…you know who is doing this, Kona-chan?" Tsukasa asked.

Konata shook her head. "No I don't…but if I had to guess why they're doing this, I might be able to put myself in their mind and see why."

Miyuki and Tsukasa exchanged concerned looks with each other.

"If Hiyorin was here, I bet she too could understand and possibly give an idea as to why all of this is happening. Tsukasa… Miyuki…there are things that happen in this school that you don't know. There are secrets and deceptions everywhere within these walls…and I believe all of those secrets and lies had finally caught up to someone and they snapped." Konata's voice suddenly changed and a small hint but still detectable amount of anger rose in her voice, startling Miyuki and Tsukasa.

"Konata-san…what are you saying?" Miyuki asked.

Before Konata could respond, the three girls' hearts leaped into their throats when the clapping of automatic gunfire began tearing through the hallways again. Tsukasa instinctively buried herself into Miyuki's body as she hugged the ailing Hiiragi twin close and she too winced in fear. Konata however remained solid as she stared at her barricade covering the door while the shooting continued. Gulping, she didn't want to admit it but she had a sinking feeling she knew who was responsible…but she dared not utter her name.

As the patter of gunfire continued to sound in the school, a shaking and trembling Yutaka Kobayakawa was sitting on the grass with a blanket wrapped around her quaking shoulders. A paramedic had already inspected the frail and frightened young girl and saw she was physically okay but she patiently sat and waited for her big sister to arrive. Yui Narumi's unit was also

called to the school but the mass bedlam swarming Saitama had slowed her progress to the crime scene.

However, she wasn't completely alone when she heard a middle-aged man's voice call, "Yu-chan, Yu-chan!"

Yutaka quickly turned her head towards the voice and she felt her eyes flood again when she saw her uncle and semi-parental figure Sojiro Izumi rush over to her with a police escort. She quickly stood and dashed over to him and could no longer contain her emotions when she hugged him and he too pulled her into his protective embrace. The salmon-haired girl cried relentlessly into her uncle's shoulder as he tried to soothe the distraught high school student.

"It…it was so…horrible…!" Yutaka wailed. "The…the killer…she killed…so many…! She…she…she shot…Minami…!"

"There, there, Yu-chan. You're safe now." Sojiro said. "I'm sorry but I need to ask this. Do you know where your cousin is?"

Yutaka pulled back, wiped her eyes, and shook her head. "No… we…we were just in our homeroom and then…"

Yutaka once again collapsed into her uncle's arms and cried relentlessly. Sojiro wasn't an idiot and he could tell by the scale of Yutaka's emotional hysteria that the shooting started in her homeroom. "How did you escape that horrible situation?"

The question only prompted Yutaka to vent more broken emotions. "Ta…Tamura-san…! She…she saved me…! But now she's…she's…!"

Yutaka couldn't finish her sentence and continued to cry. Sojiro could only assume the worst and concluded that Hiyori Tamura was shot and killed by the school shooter getting Yutaka to safety. He continued to hold the scared girl closely as everything continued to unfold in and around the school. Sojiro tried desperately to keep himself together for Yutaka's sake but the thought of his only daughter still being stuck in there somewhere

with the killer only made his sanity crumble. He had spoken to different officers since he arrived at the school but none of them could report any news regarding the whereabouts of Konata. Students were still finding their way out of the school and being taken to different hospitals around the area.

Regrettably, the full-scale of the attack was unprecedented and nobody, not even the hospitals, were prepared to receive so many victims. Only six students were confirmed dead for now but that was only because they died either on the way to the hospital or upon arrival as a result of their wounds. Nobody wanted to even think this, but they knew the number of deaths was not going to hold at six when the ordeal would finally be over and all the bodies would be carried out of Ryoo High School. So far, the number of wounded stood at a gut-wrenching thirty-eight with plenty more still in the school.

"Yutaka!" A female voice called over the crowd and the salmon-haired girl looked up over her uncle's shoulders and to her further emotional turmoil, she saw her older sister push her way through the crowd and under the yellow tape to reach her. Yui was dressed in her police uniform and had finally arrived at the scene.

The salmon-haired girl quickly released her uncle and made a mad dash across the schoolyard to her sister. Yui hugged Yutaka closely and even though she was a professional, Yui found it especially difficult to keep herself contained now knowing that her little sister was safe. For over an hour she was stuck in traffic and detours trying to race to the scene. When she heard the reports of shots being fired and wounded students pouring out of Ryoo High School, Yui wanted to explode. She wanted to get to the school as quickly as possible, yet the traffic and crowds of panicking people only slowed her progress, testing her patience and sanity.

It was all worth it now because she held her sister closely and she barely heard the echoing gunfire continuing to tear the inside of Ryoo High School apart. She didn't want this moment of holding her sister to end but Yutaka slowly pulled back to look at Yui.

"Onee-chan…Konata is still in there…!" Yutaka wailed. "Please… you have to save her!"

Yui's heart and eyes filled with emotions when she heard the desperate plea from her sister. She was also given the same orders as the other responding officers; to quarantine the school from the public and wait for the proper professionals to arrive. The police feared that the killer would use the anarchic atmosphere outside the school to escape in and disappear so for now, nobody could enter Ryoo High School and everyone that came out had to be searched for weapons, regardless if they were wounded or not. They also feared the shooter may purposely injure themselves to make it look like they were just another victim and escape when they had the chance.

As Yui did her best to explain to the heart-broken and traumatized Yutaka why she wasn't allowed in the school, more parents continued to flood the area hoping to find their children. Some even tried to use the news reporters in desperate attempts to find the whereabouts of their children as the gut-wrenching claps of gunfire continued in the background.

A news reporter and his cameraman approached a green-haired woman who was gripping the yellow police tape with one hand while covering her mouth with her other hand. Her purse dangled from her wrist gripping the yellow tape and she stared with a broken gaze at the school her daughter was still trapped in.

"Ma'am, please tell us, do you know anybody in Ryoo High School today?" The reporter's voice asked and the green-haired woman turned and saw the reporter's microphone and the larger camera pointing at her.

She sniffed and nodded. "Ye…yes. My name is Honoka Iwasaki and…and my daughter is…Minami Iwasaki. She's…she's a first year student at Ryoo High School. I've been trying to get into contact with my daughter since this horrible day began but..but I haven't been able to reach her yet."

"When was the last time you saw your daughter, ma'am?" The

reporter asked.

"This…this morning. We were having breakfast together like we always do and Minami took our dog out for a quick walk before she left for school." Honoka's eyes began to fill with water. "The last thing she said to me was…was…was 'I love you, mom.'"

"What were you doing when you first heard of the shooting, ma'am?" The reporter added.

"I was…I was at the grocery store when a person behind me at the checkout line told me. They saw the breaking news on their phone and I came running." Honoka quickly replied as she heard another pop behind her from inside the school.

Honoka covered her face but soon quickly reached into her purse and pulled out her wallet. She quickly fished through it and found a picture of Minami with their dog, Cherry, outside in their backyard on a summer day. The distraught mother held the picture up to the camera and the cameraman focused the lens to get a better view of it.

"Please…if anyone sees my daughter, Minami Iwasaki, please tell her that her mother is searching for her and that she loves her!" Honoka wailed and began crying on camera.

As the green-haired woman cried, two parents watched the scene unfold several rows away as they too stood at the front of the yellow tape. Miki and Tadao Hiiragi watched Honoka spill her heart with desperate pleas for people to find her daughter and it was more than enough for Miki to turn away and bury her face in her husband's chest. As a mother herself, Miki could feel Honoka's stress and dismay over her missing daughter.

"Tadao…where…?" She cried.

Her husband pulled her close and shook his head. "I don't know, dear. I don't know. We just have to keep praying. That's all we can do now."

Miki nodded with her face still nestled into his shirt. "This…this isn't right. Kagami…Tsukasa."

Tadao's cell phone suddenly began ringing in his pocket and he quickly pulled it out, hoping by some miracle it would be any of his twin daughters calling him to say they were okay. He saw it was Inori's phone number on the screen and he answered the phone, though he could barely finish his eldest daughter's name when he was blasted by her crying voice demanding answers. Tadao once again had to recite the fact that he didn't know any more details regarding Kagami and Tsukasa's conditions and for her to remain calm and keep praying.

As Miki turned away, another woman pushed through the crowd and arrived next to the Hiiragi housewife. This woman was roughly the same age as she was with short pink hair and she stared at the crime scene with such a frightened look. Something about this woman seemed to give off a persona that was once full of life and innocence, like a sister figure over a mother figure, but that was all gone now as she too was missing a daughter inside Ryoo High School.

"Is your child in there, too?" Miki asked as she stood side-by-side the pink-haired woman.

She nodded. "Yes…my daughter."

Miki nodded again. "Mine too. Two of them actually."

The pink-haired woman turned and looked at Miki. "I cannot even begin to imagine what you're feeling."

"Exactly the same thing you are." Miki replied to the stranger. "I'm so scared right now. I birthed my two daughters and as mothers, we do fear something like this could happen but we take comfort in the odds that it most likely won't."

The pink-haired woman nodded. "Until it does. I understand. I remember when my daughter was about to start school for the first time. I wanted to enroll her in a private all-girls school but

she was adamant about being in public school."

Miki gave a confused look to her.

"Oh, my apologies. We're a rather upscale family but my daughter…she's different. She never let her more luxurious upbringing get to her and she is very kindhearted and loves everybody." The pink-haired woman stated. "I'm sure she's even crossed paths with your two daughters before and I'm sure she was humbled by their good graces."

Miki smiled. "Thank you. My husband and I have tried our best to raise them the best way we know how. We do have a large family at home with me, my husband, and our four daughters."

The pink-haired woman's eyes went large. "Oh my, that is quite a lot of children. Just between us ladies, you must really know how to show your man a good time."

Though they were surrounded by a tumultuous situation, Miki could see that the pink-haired woman was trying to cheer her up despite also being scared for her own daughter, which the Hiiragi housewife could see. Graciously, Miki giggled with a blush and replied, "He only thinks he wears the pants in our house…but I sure know how to make him take them off."

The two women giggled together as the shooting had been quiet ever since the two mothers met.

"My name is Miki Hiiragi and that's my husband Tadao on the phone with our other daughter." Miki introduced.

The pink-haired woman nodded with a smile. "My name is Yukari. Yukari Takara."

Despite the fact that Ayano Minegishi was unconscious, Misao and Patricia continued to carry her throughout the school while searching for an exit. Misao had one of Ayano's arms around her shoulder while Patty carried the other and the three girls approached another corner. Patty took the initiative and slowly

looked around it and to her relief, it was still empty. She signaled to Misao that it was all clear and the carried the unconscious Ayano around the corner and down the hallway.

Working together, they were able to stop Ayano's bleeding but the loss of blood had made her very weak and she passed out. She was still alive but it was vital that Misao and Patty find a way out and get her to a medic. They felt they were nearly in the clear because even though they heard the shooting echo throughout the school since they left their bathroom shelter, they could tell it was further away and they were progressively moving in the opposite direction of the killer. The two conscious females panted and sweated as they carried Ayano down the hallway that was about to lead to another dead end until it would veer right down into another one.

As they approached the next corner after finally making it through the empty hallway, they were so busy on thinking they were almost out that they didn't hear the stepping sounds of black combat boots around the corner. Seeing the large amounts of daylight around the corner, Patty and Misao quickly rounded the corner and made the mistake of not stopping and checking to see if it was clear first.

The two girls rounded the corner and stopped dead in their tracks when their eyes met the backside of the Ryoo High School shooter. The shooter's back was turned to them as the assailant smoked a cigarette in the middle of the hallway while checking on the condition of the rifle being used in the spree. Feeling their hearts beating wildly and sweat trickle down their face and necks, Patty and Misao quickly exchanged looks of intense fear with each other. Misao suddenly flicked her head back, telling her to follow her backwards and to do it quietly as the killer continued to stand with their back turned and blowing a puff of smoke upward.

Backing up slowly, Patty and Misao felt their knees go numb with every gentle step. They so desperately wanted to turn around and run like hell, but knew the sudden rustle would attract the killer's attention. Their bodies were creaking and cracking with every forced slow step and they also feared that at any second, one of their bones would crack too loudly and the killer would

turn. Their mouths as dry as cotton, they finally made it back around the corner without attracting the killer and Patty turned back to Misao.

The brown-haired girl flicked her head to help carry Ayano back the direction they came from and Patty agreed. She helped Misao carry the unconscious girl but even Patty was showing signs of fatigue as her panting grew louder and Misao tried to hush her without vocalizing her own anger at her. As they continued to carry Ayano down the desolate hallway, it was still riddled with school supplies and bullet casings on the floor and the three girls approached the potential minefield of noise.

Patty was still becoming more tired and drained from the horrendous ordeal and started to forget to pick up her feet. It would cost them. Patty's foot struck a schoolbag and it slid across the floor, creating a frighteningly loud sound and it collided with a small collection of brass bullet casings on the floor, making them ring out across the hallway and to their horror, it was followed by the sounds of combat boots striking the floor and approaching them.

Misao quickly guided Ayano and Patty off to the side and they ducked behind another corner just as the killer turned into the hallway and stared down it, looking for the source of the noise. The two girls breathed deeply and Misao's anger at Patty reached a threshold.

"Are you trying to get us all killed?!" She hissed quietly.

"I'm sorry! I'm just so tired and I can barely walk anymore." Patty hissed back also with a whisper. "I'm scared and feeling sick so lay off! I'm trying to help you!"

Patty turned back and slowly inched her head around the corner and saw the killer approaching a classroom door and looking for any possible signs of life to be exterminated. The golden-haired girl continued to watch the killer investigate the area where the noise came from and so far it seemed the school shooter was still oblivious to the presence of the three hiding girls.

Misao turned her head and looked at Patty with leering and conniving eyes. Misao was a very active girl with track and field and could spot fatigue and the desire to give up in an instant. She saw all of that in Patty as the girl panted and sweated. All Misao had on her mind was getting Ayano out of the school but feared that if Patty stayed with them, it would only end badly for all three of them. She already attracted the killer once so what guaranteed Misao that it wouldn't happen again? Knowing that the answer was nothing, the brown-haired girl began to hyperventilate quietly while she contemplated something evil. She needed to get Ayano out of there, yet now she saw Patty as a threat to that objective but she couldn't tell Patty to go on her own because she knew she wouldn't.

Instead, Misao's heart and adrenaline pumped harder when she glanced down and saw a large piece of glass sitting next to her from a shot-out window. Everything in Misao's brain suddenly went dark and her body started to go on autopilot as she slowly reached out and gripped the piece of glass, careful not to slice her skin open. She held it in her hands and stared at it reflecting in the lights above her.

"I think he's about to give up." Patty whispered, her back still turned to Misao and observing the shooter.

Misao looked up from the piece of glass and at Patty. So many hostile thoughts swarmed in her brain and she continued to see the golden-haired girl as a threat to her and especially Ayano's survival. Misao began to think that she had managed to save Ayano once on her own before when the shooting started so she could still drag her out of the school on her own. It suddenly clicked in Misao's head and everything that was once friendly about her shut off.

Gripping the triangular-shaped piece of glass, Misao quickly lunged it forward and stabbed Patty in her right side with the glass. The fragment dug itself into her soft flesh and she screamed loudly at the painful intrusion, catching the attention of the killer and the assailant as the golden-haired girl fell into the open. Clutching her pulsing and bleeding side with the glass still lodged inside her, Misao quickly turned away and picked Ayano up.

Before Misao could turn and run, she felt Patty's hand wrap itself on her right shoe and squeeze. Misao suddenly made the mistake of looking down at the foreign girl as she clutched her bleeding side and cried. She begged for help but Misao's loyalty to Ayano was much deeper than her bond with Patty. Misao quickly raised her shoe in a panic and kicked Patty's hand away as she finally turned and carried Ayano down the hallway.

Patty continued to scream for Misao to come back as the killer stood and slowly began to walk towards the ailing golden-haired girl. When Misao disappeared with Ayano around another corner, Patty's eyes leaked more water and she suddenly went quiet when she felt the presence of a human being standing next to her. She slowly turned her head and looked up at the black ski mask and black-clothed body of the school shooter, who still held their assault rifle tightly.

"Oh god…please…have mercy…!" Patty wailed as the killer raised the rifle and pointed it at her head.

"Oh not today, Patty-chan. Not today." Izumi Wakase whispered, deeply shocking the golden-haired otaku.

All the life drained from Patty's face when she recognized the voice. "I…Izumi…is that—"

Two gunshots echoed in the hallway and Patricia Martin never got the chance to finish her sentence as her body fell back and ceased its movements as Izumi Wakase stood above her latest victim.

CHAPTER 6

Hikaru Sakuraba continued her righteous quest in searching for students trapped in the classrooms throughout the school. She had played Russian Roulette with her life on more than one occasion with the clapping of gunfire sounding off near her and she also heard the loud steps of the assailant's combat boots nearby a few times as well. On one occasion, she quickly had to duck into a janitor's closet when they became too close and she watched the shadow of the killer pass by under the door. Still, she tried her best to keep her cool despite the tumultuous situation she was a part of and kept searching.

She finally made it to the teachers' lounge where everyone's desks were and it too was deserted. Sakuraba was perked by curiosity of the events continuing to unfold which motivated her to find a television and she quickly turned it on. It didn't take long for her to realize that not only all of Japan, but the entire world was tuned in to the shooting at Ryoo High School. The news coverage plagued every channel and regular television broadcasts were interrupted to report the ongoing drama.

"And if you are just joining us, terror has struck Saitama as reports of ongoing gunfire coming from inside Ryoo High School continue to be relayed to us." One reporter said from a news studio.

Sakuraba used the remote control to change the channel, only to see another news station reporting the same story. "We have just received word that ten students from Ryoo High School are now confirmed dead as the hospitals in Saitama have been completely overrun by victims of the ongoing shooting and surgeons are now

in short supply. Wounded students have also been evacuated to nearby hospitals in Tokyo, some by helicopter, where doctors and surgeons are better prepared to handle the increasing number of victims."

She changed the channel one final time. "We now have unconfirmed reports of the identity of the Ryoo High School shooter, according to one student who was able to escape after being held by the assailant. The shooter has been identified as freshman Izumi Wakase, a female student, who supposedly comes from a more upscale and prestigious background. Wakase is also class president of her freshman class. Again, these are unconfirmed reports and we'll have more on this startling development as more information becomes available."

Taking a deep breath and exhaling, Sakuraba raised the remote control again and moved her thumb to the power button. She had seen enough of reporters describing the horrors she was living in and she turned the television off, allowing the screen to go blank, though she soon wished she hadn't. When the screen went black, something caught Sakuraba's eye reflecting in the television screen's glass. A figure was standing in the room directly behind her dressed in black wearing a black ski mask and holding a military style assault rifle. The Ryoo High School shooter was standing behind her and staring at her.

Time seemed to suddenly freeze for Sakuraba and she gulped as sweat began to form across her head as she stared at the murderer through her glasses in the television screen's reflection. Silence engulfed the room and the only audible sound was the ticking of the room's clock as Sakuraba continued to stare at the screen at the killer in the room with her, who resembled a statue without moving a single muscle.

Sakuraba fought the urge to jump when she finally saw the assailant move. The shooter turned and slowly began to walk further into the teachers' lounge with her until she pulled a chair out from one of the teacher desks and slowly sat down. Once again, silence followed as the shooter sat and Sakuraba stood with the latter not knowing what to do next.

Hearing the shooter speak in her female voice sent chills down

the teacher's spine when she said, "You can drop the act, now. I know you see me."

Sakuraba slowly turned her head to her right, her bones cracking with every movement until she looked into the burgundy eyes of the shooter sitting at the late Nanako Kuroi's desk. Clearing her throat and trying to remain calm, Sakuraba uttered, "Are…are you Izumi Wakase?"

To Sakuraba's surprise, the shooter slowly stood and rested the assault rifle on Kuroi's desk. She lifted her left hand and gripped her ski mask and slowly began to pull it off. The disguising cloth suddenly fell off her head and Izumi Wakase stood there, her long brown hair bounded together in a bun until she took out the ponytail holder and three bobby pins, allowing her long brown hair to dangle behind her once again. Her face however showed the look of an innocent high school student and not the expression of a malicious killer.

"I am." Wakase replied.

Sakuraba gulped upon seeing how calm and complacent Izumi was despite the predicament she had put herself in. It was already confirmed that she had murdered ten people, though she showed no outward expressions of guilt or fear of what would happen to her.

Speechless, Sakuraba allowed Wakase to speak for her again when she said, "And you're Hikaru Sakuraba, right? I've seen you around."

It stunned the teacher to see how calm and casual the shooter was, as if she believed she didn't do anything wrong. Either that or Izumi Wakase was suffering from some sort of mental disorder that didn't allow her to see the true horrors of the atrocities she was committing. Regardless, Sakuraba knew she was in trouble and she had the potential of becoming another statistic in the slaughter.

"I need to ask…why are you doing this?" Sakuraba asked bluntly and with a tough voice in a vicious mental battle with Wakase.

Wakase, to Sakuraba's further shock and even horror, grinned slightly. "Why?"

"...Why...what?" The teacher asked with confusion.

"I meant why do you 'need to ask?'" Wakase replied. "That always fascinated me about the human race. Why is it that we 'need to know' about why people do what they do? What is it about the human mind and closure that makes us think we feel better? After all, even if I told you why I was doing this and my own sob story that I'd use to try and justify these acts, it won't resurrect the dead, undo all the damage I've done, or rebuild the lives I've shattered. People know this, yet they still seek closure from the one who destroyed them. Why is that, teacher? Why?"

Out of all the responses Wakase could've given, that was one that completely blindsided Sakuraba. She didn't expect to have her question be answered with not only another question, but also a philosophical one. Regardless, Sakuraba could still tell that Wakase was truly curious about this topic so the teacher decided to humor the student turned murderer and engage her in a logical conversation. With any luck, she would be able to talk Wakase into giving herself up.

"That's a good question and it's hard to pinpoint an answer for that. Perhaps it has something to do with the fact that there are so many uncertainties in the world and too many mysteries go unsolved." Sakuraba speculated while keeping eyes fixated on the assault rifle on Kuroi's desk. "I believe that people seek closure or explanations because it gives a glimpse into the reason behind the acts of an individual that others fail to see for themselves. Perhaps it's the ongoing process of humans trying to understand each other in a world gone mad. It could also be that humans seek answers to events like this because quite frankly, not knowing an answer and believing that anybody is capable of doing what you're doing is too damn scary to think about. That being said, I think people seek not only truth but also hope that not everyone can go crazy."

"You think what I'm doing is crazy?" Wakase snapped.

Sakuraba gulped but believed that if she continued to challenge Wakase on a mental level she would be able to break her down. "Isn't it? What would you call it what you're doing then? How do you explain all of this?"

Wakase's face remained plain and she glanced around. Her eyes darted in her head several times until she looked back at Sakuraba and replied. "I think it's because people are cowards. Self-proclaimed righteous, but worthless, spineless animals underneath and the reason they demand reasons or explanation to…'craziness'…is because they need what they perceive as rationality to give meaning to their hollow, petty lives. And the reason they want explanations is because they're too damn cowardly to live with the idea that maybe they're not strong enough to live with mystery. Rationality to me, however, is now an oxymoron. Please tell me…what is rational about people who will inevitably paint me as a heartless monster because of what I've done, yet they will also inevitably turn a blind eye to the cause of it and allow something like this to happen again eventually? If I say to you it was because I was bullied, people will look at me with a puzzled face and wonder why I didn't just suck it up. If I say to you it was because of the pressure my family put me under to conform to them because they were worried about *their* social status, people will tell me to grow up and make my own decisions without even thinking about how it would affect my life with my family. They would just tell me to grow up, move on, and make my own decisions without even thinking about what that would do to me. So tell me, Sakuraba, am I a tragic end product of a world and society gone mad…or am I just crazy?"

Sakuraba didn't know how to respond to such a calm and collective retort from a student who had ruthlessly shot up Ryoo High School. When Sakuraba first saw Wakase's reflection in the television, she thought for sure that she would be killed instantly or witness mind-numbing insanity first and then she would be killed. She never expected to hold such a deep conversation with the same person who had gunned down so many of her fellow students, some coming from her class. Instead, she tried to turn the tables around on Wakase and answer her question with more questions.

"I'm not judging you, Wakase, not even after all of this…at least

not yet. Not until you tell me why. I want to hear it from your mouth and I'm listening to you now, unlike your fellow students or your family, who have obviously failed you. Please tell me… why are you doing this?" Sakuraba demanded.

It was then that Sakuraba believed that she may have made a mistake by digging too far into Wakase's head. She knew this when she watched the student pick up the assault rifle again and hold it in her arms. The teacher fought the urge to tremble in fear at the gesture and it continued to frighten her when she saw that Wakase's facial features remained the same. She didn't appear angry, hurt, distraught, happy, sad, or anything. The homicidal student was basically a rock with a face.

"I don't want to talk here anymore." Wakase suddenly snapped. "I want to go to another place. An empty classroom next level up."

Sakuraba gulped, not knowing where this was headed. "Wa… Wakase…let's think this through."

"I just want to keep talking. That's all." Wakase was quick to respond, as if she was expecting that objection from the teacher.

Because Wakase had the weaponry, she was the one in charge of the situation and Sakuraba had no choice but to role with the punches. She agreed to continue talking and led the way out of the teacher's lounge to keep Wakase's trust. The armed student left her ski mask behind, stating that she no longer needed it and it gave Sakuraba hope that maybe the end of this assault was near. Wakase gave directions of which way to go and they eventually climbed the stairs to the third floor and to an empty classroom. Sakuraba took the initiative and opened the door and to her relief, it was empty just as Wakase said it would be.

Outside the school, Yutaka continued to sit outside and away from the school as Yui sat with her. The two sisters sat on a bench across the street from the school while continuing to observe the mayhem in front of them as it seemed more and more people were arriving at the scene to get a glimpse of the chaos. Yui held her sister close around her shoulder while also keeping a close eye on her uncle, who was still pestering the police for

information they didn't have about his daughter. News crews also continued to swarm looking for stories while another news helicopter zipped by overhead, adding more noise to the endless anarchy.

"So are you sure you don't want me to take you home, Yutaka?" Yui asked as she watched the scene keenly.

Yutaka nodded. "I'm sure. I'm still scared and all, but I just want to make sure Minami is okay. I want to wait until it's safe to go in and then take the paramedics to where she is."

"I see." Yui replied and could only hope that Minami was hanging in there inside. Her biggest fears were her bleeding to death on that floor or the shooter coming back to finish the job. Of course, Yui didn't mention any of this to Yutaka.

"Hey onee-chan, what's that up there?" Yutaka suddenly asked.

Yui looked at the direction her sister was pointing at and saw something unusual coming from inside a third floor window. It looked like two people were struggling with each other until the unexpected happened. A large teacher's desk burst through the window, shattering the glass and making it fall three stories until it landed in the schoolyard with a massive crash and grabbing everyone's attention. What came next was even more unexpected and bordering on frightening. A teacher slowly approached the shattered open window and observed the entire crowd as all faces and cameras were on her. Hikaru Sakuraba was now making live news feeds as she continued to stand.

Inside their classroom, Sakuraba stood with her back facing Wakase. As the wind of the altitude played with her hair and white lab coat, she exclaimed, "Please reconsider everything! If you stop now and give yourself up, I promise you I'll do my best for you when you have to face trial! We can explain to them what you just told me!"

Wakase gripped her rifle and slowly raised it, still without a single facial tick that portrayed she was having second thoughts. Moving her finger to the trigger, she uttered loud enough for her

teacher to hear over the howling breeze. "Good talk, Hikaru Sakuraba."

For everyone on live TV and at the scene to see, a metal projectile quickly entered Sakuraba's back and exited the front, staining her white lab coat red at the front and to everyone's horror, the woman lost all control of her body and fell from the open window. Her lifeless body plummeted three stories down until it landed on the macadam surrounding the school with a heart-breaking splat, triggering more panic. Screams from terrified onlookers echoed across the area as the whole thing was captured on video and what came next was even more horrifying.

Izumi Wakase stepped into the opening of the shattered window with her rifle and her identity revealed for the world to see. All the news cameras focused their attention on her as her burgundy eyes scanned the crowd of people and she looked and saw many of her wounded victims still stretched out on the schoolyard on stretchers with paramedics jumping from one student to another. Her long hair wafting in the breeze, she formed a small smile and raised her rifle.

Hell itself was released onto Saitama when she pulled the trigger over and over, sending waves of the flying projectiles of death into the crowds of onlookers. They quickly claimed new victims as the hot metal tore through their fragile bodies and the crowd of concerned parents suddenly became a bloodbath. Full-blown panic consumed them as their screams rivaled the automatic gunfire and the crowd dispersed in every direction. It didn't take long for the first people in the crowd to be trampled to death in the crowd. More bullets tore through the sea of parents, throwing blood in every direction and the screams intensified and the once delicate situation for the limited amount of police suddenly became a nightmare. They were powerless to stop panic of this scale as they too were knocked to the ground by people trying to flee the killer from above.

Yui quickly snagged Yutaka into her protective grip as she screamed at the horror and dropped herself and her sister behind a police car as the bullets continued to rain down. She could feel the metal rounds clanging against the police car she was using as shelter for her and her little sister and she tried to keep her

nerves of steel alive for her sister. The loud claps of the rifle ripped Saitama apart and echoed in every corner of the city, turning it into a warzone. To make matters worse, Wakase quickly eyed her fellow wounded students trying to crawl away as she loaded her last full magazine into the rifle.

Turning her rifle to the improvised field hospital, she pelted one round after another at the screaming and crying students as they desperately tried to flee with the wounds they already had. Wakase shot and planted a bullet into the back of the head of a male student trying to crawl away with his hands because of his leg wound. She then moved the rifle to a female student who was too weak to move off her stretcher but held her arms up, as if she was trying to surrender but to Wakase, she might as well have been waving a bull's-eye target. Wakase showed no mercy when she fired and hit her in the neck, commencing a geyser of blood. She suddenly eyed another male student crawling over to a wounded female student, both her legs and one arm in bandages while only his right side was bandaged. He shielded her body with his and it was clear whoever this girl was, she meant something special to him, whether she was his girlfriend or sister. Regardless, Wakase didn't care as she fired once and hit him in the back, killing him instantly as his dead body rested on top of the screaming girl.

Izumi Wakase continued to fire relentlessly at her fellow students until she heard a click in her rifle and the bullets ended. Her reign of terror with the assault rifle was over and she quickly dropped it as the police finally got the opportunity to return fire. They returned fire with their small side arms as Wakase quickly ducked back into the school, though her day was far from over as she reached behind her black belt and took out the automatic pistol and was on the hunt again. Her face remained solid during the whole ordeal without one show of regret.

Yutaka continued to scream relentlessly, as did the rest of the crowd as it was over as quickly as it began. With her sister still crying, Yui slowly looked up from behind her bullet-riddled police car and saw more scenes of pure Hell. Parents who had flocked to collect their children now rested on the cold concrete of the road and sidewalk in pools of their own blood. Others were wounded and holding their injuries while screaming for medical assistance, though there was hardly any to give

anymore.

It suddenly hit home when Yui scanned and saw a middle-aged man with blue hair also motionless on the sidewalk and bleeding from his back and facing down. She didn't need to see his face to know that her uncle and Konata's father was hit and bleeding while remaining still. In a panic, she quickly scurried over to him and rolled him onto his back, showing his eyes were closed and he wasn't bleeding. Her emotions exploded as she called his name and began to perform CPR as Yutaka watched helplessly and continued to cry. Yui continued to press hard in her procedure to revive her uncle but her eyes became teary when she saw it was proving to be a losing battle.

Hearing the barrage rattled her eardrums so badly Kagami thought she was going to go deaf when it was all over. The killer was on the same floor as she was but she continued onward to Kuroi's classroom to find her sister. This was one of the final places Kagami intended to search for Tsukasa. She remembered shortly after the attack began the principal made an announcement for students to either evacuate to the nearest exit or barricade themselves inside their classrooms.

Kagami however became stressed and more scared when she saw the large blood trail leading into Kuroi's classroom, which unknown to her was the blood from the departed teacher. She unwittingly walked past a few spent bullet casings and the bodies of two students were ahead of her; the two students who had tried to gain access to the classroom already but were ultimately cut down. Kagami began to fear the worst as she approached the door quietly and knocked. Silence was her only response and Kagami thought that maybe it was proof that her sister had made it out. She knocked again a little louder and once again she was met with no audible response and she couldn't take her eyes off the large blood puddle leading inside the classroom. She assumed the worst and that everyone in the classroom was either dead or had evacuated but still, Kagami couldn't give up hope.

Giving up on Kuroi's classroom, she decided to search elsewhere for Tsukasa before evacuating herself and the twin-tailed girl began to move down the hallway. As she got further away, it was the faint sound of a whimper and a shuffling inside Kuroi's

classroom that caught Kagami's ears. Something about the whimper sounded very familiar. It gave off a feminine vibe, which could've came from any student but something about it seemed too familiar to Kagami. She stopped in the hallway and continued to listen to see if it would sound again and to her surprise, it did. It sounded like a young girl's whimper of fear and Kagami had heard this snivel before. She had heard it many times growing up from the girl she lived with. The girl that was afraid of borderline everything growing up and she always sounded this noise when she was scared.

Could it be…?

Kagami quickly returned to the door, knocked again and whispered, "Hello is anybody in there? I'm looking for my sister, Tsukasa Hiiragi."

Kagami was barely able to complete her second sentence when the rustling inside the room increased and she could hear female voices but couldn't understand the words they spoke. She tried opening the door herself but could feel it was barricaded and it wouldn't open but hope for her grew when she heard the people on the other side tearing the barricade apart. It was a long process as nearly all the desks and chairs in the classroom were used to create the obstacle but Kagami suddenly readied herself when she saw the locking mechanisms on the door get released.

The door quickly slid open and Kagami nearly passed out from exhaustion at who was standing before her. The one girl she always swore she'd look after and protect. Her younger fraternal twin sister Tsukasa stood only inches away from Kagami with a look showing thousands of emotions at once. Tsukasa's eyes filled with tears and she blinked once, turning them into waterfalls and making the younger Hiiragi twin jump forward and hug Kagami. Tsukasa wailed loudly as she hugged Kagami.

Kagami however tried to remain strong to keep everyone calm but when she saw Miyuki and Konata rush over to her and join the hug, it proved to be futile. Kagami allowed herself to cry as she held the warmth of her sister and her friends closely. The reunion had to be quick and brief as they still had a murderer in the building with them and Kagami wasted no time entering the

classroom and they began to rebuild their barricade. All the while they still had no idea they were sitting on top of an explosive ending.

CHAPTER 7

Every possible negative emotion that one could feel was consuming Misao Kusakabe like a wildfire as she continued to carry her unconscious friend to safety. Tired, sweating, trembling, and nearly depleted of energy, Misao desperately tried to keep herself from passing out from the fear while carrying Ayano Minegishi by her arm over her shoulder. Another emotion was beginning to set in after she continued to think about her earlier actions. That emotion was guilt. She could still see the last look in Patty's eyes before she kicked away her pleading grip and left her for the shooter. Even when Misao heard the two shots echoing behind her that ended Patty's life, she tried to keep all her focus on Ayano and to think of Patty as the equivalent of squashing a bug. She needed to see Patty as less than a person in her mind to justify her backstabbing action against her that ultimately ended in her death.

Still pressing forward, Misao knew that the horrible ordeal for them was about to be over. They were approaching the nurse's office and the brown-haired girl knew an exit was nearby, which gave her more strength knowing they were almost free. As Misao continued to carry Ayano, she suddenly felt her unconscious friend stir.

"Mi…Misa-chan." Ayano whispered as she weakly lifted her head.

Misao quickly rested Ayano on the floor and propped her back against the wall. "It's okay, Aya-chan. We're almost out of here so just hang on a little bit longer."

Ayano shifted her weak eyes around. "Where's…Patty-chan?"

Misao did her best to not show the guilt in her eyes as she continued to stare into Ayano's blue whirlpools of color. Through her gulp, Misao replied, "She…she had to go on without us. She got cold feet and ran off."

Because of Ayano's weakened condition, all she could do was blink slowly and gargle a response. "But…but that doesn't… sound like…her…"

The wounded girl's eyes slowly drifted downward and Misao began to panic when she held Ayano's side and it felt wet. Misao looked down and saw fresh blood was beginning to stain Ayano's white and blue uniform top and blue skirt, indicating her wound had opened again and time for her was almost up. The brown-haired girl was no medical expert but common sense was telling her that if she tried to move Ayano anymore, she would kill her. She had already lost too much blood and she needed medical attention now.

Fighting her panic, Misao quickly looked around for any kind of solution but where she and Ayano had landed was like a sign from above. Misao's eyes suddenly met the hanging sign of the nurse's station and suddenly she felt hope. The brown-haired girl quickly wrapped her hands under each of Ayano's armpits and began to drag her as gently as she could through the short distance until they arrived at the nurse's office.

Misao tried to open the door but her heart plummeted when she discovered it was locked. She didn't give up though and hoped that people inside had the same idea as she did in the bathroom by hiding so she knocked and whispered.

"Hello is anybody in there? Please help us…my friend is hurt and she's not going to make it if I don't get her help. Please…if anybody is in there please help us." She quietly pleaded in the empty hallway.

A heartbreaking silence followed and Misao was about to give up and ready herself to pick Ayano up again. It would be a long-shot but Ayano still had a slight chance at survival if Misao bluntly carried her the remaining short distance to the exit. Before Misao could pick her up though, hope once again returned when she heard the door of the nurse's office unlocking. The brown-haired girl braced herself for what might happen next and to her relief, the door opened and Ryoo High School's nurse, Fuyuki Amahara, looked out. It startled Misao to see her white coat was stained

with blood and feared the shooter was there but soon realized it was because she wasn't the only student seeking medical help and shelter.

Amahara looked down the hallway in both directions and saw Misao holding the bleeding and barely conscious Ayano, showing that they weren't part of the ongoing massacre. She quickly bent down to Ayano and lifted her up by one of her arms while Misao assisted by carrying the other. When they entered the nurse's office, it was like a scene from a warzone. All the beds were filled to capacity, some even holding two students at once. Used and blood-soaked bandages and medical supplies were filling several trash bags in the corner and the red liquid also stained the once white tile floor. The students on the beds were also stained with blood from their wounds and bandaged in ways only to stop the bleeding, so some students still had the bullets lodged in their bodies, creating unholy amounts of pain for them. It was a mentally-devastating image to see and hear such agony from the students as they groaned in pain from their wounds. They were stuck in a school nurse's office where no serious pain killers or surgeons resided to help with their injuries so Amahara had a very limited number of options.

Amahara and Misao were finally able to carry Ayano to a bed where an unconscious student was also resting, their head bandaged from flying glass after a stream of bullets tore a window apart as the student passed by it. They rested Ayano on the bed as her side continued to leak the red liquid and Amahara took it from there. She took a pair of medical scissors and snipped Ayano's bloodied uniform top open on the side to get a better look at the wound. Her soft and delicate flesh around the wound was beginning to turn a haunting collage of purple and black, showing an infection was beginning to set in.

"Okay…she's lost a lot of blood but she's still lucky because her wound is a clean in and out with no bullet fragments inside." Amahara observed. "She needs a blood transfusion right away. Do you know what blood type she is?"

Misao quickly searched her memory until it clicked. "Type AB."

Amahara nodded and left to find another male student, who was

sitting in a chair with a minor injury. His arm was bandaged and in a sling from more flying glass and she brought him over to Ayano and sat him down. The school nurse informed the two girls that he had Type AB blood too and he agreed to donate some of his blood to help Ayano. Amahara prepared the necessary tools and hooked the male student's arm up to a needle attached to a collection bag. Misao thanked the student with teary eyes for doing this while he took everything with calmness and grace, introducing himself as Minoru Shiraishi.

Fuyuki Amahara continued to examine the weak Ayano Minegishi as she breathed deeply and sweated profusely. Misao scooted back over to the nurse still with teary eyes and whispered, "Nurse Amahara, please tell me she's going to be okay."

Amahara lifted her stethoscope and turned back to Misao. "Yes, she'll live. We won't be able to move her out of here though so she's just going to have to stay here and wait for help to arrive. The best thing we can do now is give her the blood and keep giving her water to keep her hydrated."

Misao nodded and another student called for Amahara's assistance, distracting her and making her rush over to help. When the nurse was gone, Misao rested on her knees and held Ayano's hand as she continued to fight to stay conscious. The brown-haired girl held Ayano's clammy hand to her face and she kissed it gently.

"Aya-chan…you've been my best friend for so many years. We've been through everything together. Please…you have to hold on." Misao whispered. "I would do anything to keep you alive… anything…"

Ayano was still conscious enough to hear Misao's last fragmented sentence. She slowly shifted her tired eyes over to her lifetime friend and whispered, "Anything? You would do…anything…to keep me…alive?"

Misao nodded ferociously. "Yes, yes. Anything."

To her surprise, Ayano's eyes suddenly became flooded with sorrow and she sighed deeply, as if she was hurt and disappointed at the same time. "Anything…that's what I was afraid of."

Misao tilted her head in confusion.

"How…how could you…do that…to Patty-chan…?" Ayano whispered with a broken voice and turned away in disgust while letting a tear escape her eye.

She could feel her head pulsate in pain as her senses began to return to normal. Hiyori Tamura was slowly beginning to stir for the first time after being knocked cold by Izumi Wakase's physical attack and she barely remembered anything. As she felt herself lying on the cold hard floor, she could feel both a mixture of blood and saliva drip out of her mouth, as well as a nice stream of it leaking from a burning gash on her head.

Slowly trying to lift her eyelids, Hiyori quickly found it to be a difficult and painful task and when her vision became illuminated, her image was blurry. She habitually began to feel around the area for her glasses and when she found them, she was frightened to see they were broken and in pieces near her numb body. It took several more seconds for the feeling in Hiyori's limbs to return and she slowly began to move again, still dazed and confused.

Pulling herself up, Hiyori sat upright on the floor and tried to make sense of everything that had happened. She slowly lifted her hand to her burning face and touched it, making her instantly regret it. The slightest touch sent shockwaves of pain throughout her body and she yelped in the combination of burning and pulsing pain. As the pain continued to radiate throughout her body, she looked around, though her vision was limited in distance because of her nearsightedness. Still feeling woozy and dizzy from the throbbing bump on her head, Hiyori suddenly remembered something. She was walking Yutaka Kobayakawa to safety and then…nothing.

"Damn…is Yutaka okay?" Hiyori couldn't help but ask herself out

loud. Perhaps hearing her thoughts out loud would be able to stir something. "I remember walking with her…and then…we stopped. We stopped for some reason and then…I can't remember."

It wasn't until the distant shot of a gun rang out in the school that not only caught Hiyori's attention, it restored everything in her mind. She remembered finding Yutaka in her classroom over the bleeding Minami Iwasaki and she promised to get the salmon-haired girl to safety until they crossed paths with the shooter, Izumi Wakase. Hiyori negotiated with her and Wakase allowed Yutaka to go free and then Hiyori kept talking until something sank in and instead of killing her, Wakase just knocked her out. Hiyori also had another memory trying unearth itself from her subconscious and for some reason the long-haired girl remembered it being very important but couldn't put it into words. It had something to do with what Wakase said to her before she passed out.

As hard as she tried, Hiyori couldn't assemble Wakase's exact words in her mind to be comprehended. Still, something was telling Hiyori that it was something important, as if Wakase was trying to warn her about something or to be aware of something else that was in the school. When Hiyori decided it wasn't worth anymore effort, she gave it up and slowly pulled herself to her feet. Her body still ached and pulsated with every movement until she was on her feet again and she struggled to keep her balance. Wakase's strike to her head had caused some cognitive damage and Hiyori struggled to reacquire her motor skills as she still struggled to find the exit in her mind.

Wait…if I'm this close to our classroom, then that means Minami is probably still there. God I hope she was able to hang on.

Despite her fragile and dazed state, Hiyori turned away from the direction of the exit and began to trek backwards and further into the school. She knew that Izumi Wakase was still around and unleashing her merciless spree but that didn't deter Hiyori from finding her fellow student and friend. If anything, she would be happy to tell Minami that Yutaka had made it to safety and was in the protection of the police and her family. Still, Hiyori's progress was slowed by the blow her head had taken and

she still struggled to stand upright as she walked, though she was also happy her classroom wasn't too far from where Wakase had cornered her and Yutaka just minutes earlier. It didn't take long until she reached ground zero of the Ryoo High School shooting.

Hiyori rounded the corner and entered the classroom still ripe with the stench of death and turned her head to the back of the classroom. To her sudden surprise and even horror, Minami Iwasaki was gone. The spot she was forced to leave her in was vacant with the only clue that she was there was the bloodied and crumbled uniform top from one of the dead students. Hiyori wanted to call her name loudly but knew it would attract Wakase's attention and she wouldn't be spared a second time. Looking around and breathing deeply, Hiyori tried to find some clue as to where the green-haired girl had vanished to. She knew that Minami had to still be alive because if Wakase did in fact return to the classroom to kill her, why would she go through all the trouble of moving her body?

A trail of blood on the floor caught Hiyori's attention. It consisted of a few drops but the clue that it was Minami's was that it was fresh. It was still glistening in the overhead lights, unlike the rest of the class where the puddles around the bodies and on the walls had dried and crystallized. This fresh trail led out of the classroom and further down the hallway, opposite the direction of where Hiyori took Yutaka. Was Minami herself trying to find a way out? That couldn't be the case because the closest exit from their classroom was the direction Hiyori took Yutaka. Where did that green-haired girl go?

Regardless of these answerless questions, Hiyori gulped and decided to keep trying to help her fellow students. Even though Yutaka had told her not to, she still blamed herself for all that had happened today and to clearly illustrate the depths of her guilt, Hiyori didn't mind if Wakase found her again and shot her to death. Fighting the urge to sit down and rest despite how large it was, Hiyori continued to press forward while following the blood trail as closely as her impaired vision would allow. She continued to lean against the wall and use it as not only support for her wobbling body, but also as a guide for her bad vision. The fresh red spots on the floor continued endlessly forward past other bodies and debris and to Hiyori's rising fear, closer to the loudening gunfire.

The scene outside Ryoo High School remained one of a genocidal aftermath. Despite the fact that Izumi Wakase's ambush from above was over, the avalanche of hellish noise continued to rise in Saitama. The combination of human screams, cries, and police car and ambulance sirens mixed together painted a picture of genuine anarchy and the bodies being attended to either dead or still alive also added credibility to its horrors.

From behind someone's car, Tadao Hiiragi continued to use himself as a shield for his trembling wife. When the shooting first commenced, he was one of the only ones who kept their cool and quickly snagged his wife and dragged her behind a car they used as a shield. Even though the metal body of the car provided enough shelter for them, Tadao still kept Miki covered with his body to ensure her safety.

When the attack from Wakase was over, Tadao took his wife's hand and the two held each other close when they stood up from above the car and saw the full-scale damage the deranged student had unleashed. Parents who had flocked to the school to fulfill their protective duties for their children now rested on the street as victims themselves. The warm street began to flow with blood on this continuing beautiful spring day, adding a never-ending scene of contradicting terror. This would only be something one would see on a dark and scary night, not on a picturesque and warm day that once started with so much life and vigor.

Even though the two parents wanted to flee the horrendous scene, they were still parents which persuaded them to stay and slowly move forward again, anxious to see their two daughters again. Miki wrapped her left arm around her husband's side and nestled her right hand against his chest as Tadao also held his wife close, each one giving the other comfort through their warming embraces. Miki couldn't contain herself and began to let it all out as she cried seeing her fellow parent roll and groan in pain on the ground and all they could do was wait for the little amount of medical staff to help them. For some, it was clear that help was going to arrive too late and they would bleed to death on the street.

Suddenly, a news crew approached the ailing Hiiragi couple and Miki looked into the large camera's lens in her face with a teary face. A news reporter quickly swarmed in and shoved his microphone in her face and said, "Ma'am, how does it feel to think that your children may have already suffered the same fate as these people out here?"

The blunt and insensitive question infuriated the Hiiragi housewife but she was too upset and scared to react with anger. Instead, her eyes released more tears and she buried her face in her husband's chest while crying loudly. Tadao on the other hand was strong enough to react with anger and he reached out and covered the camera lens with his hand.

"How dare you upset my wife like that?! These people are here for their children despite the danger to themselves and you're here putting that camera in their faces! Give these poor people space and leave us alone!" Tadao thundered and pushed the cameraman back, collected his wife, and escorted her away from the news team as she continued to weep.

The reporter however got back into frame and cleared his throat. "As you can see the people here are clearly distraught over the recent developments at Ryoo High School where the shooter opened fire on a crowd of parents and wounded students only minutes ago. The situation here is continuing to deteriorate and still no signs of—"

The reporter paused as more news was being fed to him through his earpiece.

"We have breaking news regarding the shooter at Ryoo High School. The identity of the shooter has been confirmed as freshman Izumi Wakase and this development has just taken a chilling turn. I have just received news that police have arrived at the Wakase residence and it has been discovered that the entire Wakase family is dead. I repeat, the family members of Izumi Wakase have been confirmed dead at their home by the police." The reporter added with haste. "We still have no word on the causes of their deaths but this reporter speculates on the record that it could be connected to the ongoing shooting at the school. Of course, we'll have more on these grisly details as they

become available to us but it is also obvious that the violence in Saitama has clearly spread."

Tadao steered his wife away from the other news cameras scanning the grotesque scene of wounded parents and onlookers for fear that they would be cornered by more reporters. Miki looked up from her husband's chest and asked, "Why…why do they have to be like that? Have they no shame? Don't they understand or even respect the bonds between a parent and their children?"

Tadao shook his head slowly. "I don't know, dear. I don't know. It is a travesty though."

Miki continued to look around through her watery vision until she spotted something else that frightened her deeply. Her new friend Yukari Takara was being lifted on a stretcher with a gunshot wound to the shoulder as she wailed in the pain. Miki quickly dashed over to the wounded pink-haired woman and grasped her hand as the paramedics rolled her to an awaiting ambulance.

"Hang in there, Takara-san. You're going to be just fine." Miki whispered as they arrived at the ambulance.

To Miki's surprise, Yukari smiled. "Thank you…and please, call me Yukari. You and I…we're both mothers so we're connected through our children. We share a bond you know."

Miki smiled back and nodded. "Yes…yes we do. Please promise me you'll stay in touch with us."

"Same here. Good luck…Miki Hiiragi." She said with a sincere smile as the paramedics finished loading her into the ambulance and they slammed the doors shut.

Miki watched with her husband's hands on her shoulders as the ambulance sounded its loud sirens and began to take the wounded woman away. She joined her hands together and held them in front of her chest. Despite the horrific situation around

them, Miki was still able to smile lightly again knowing she had made a new friend with a very important thing in common; their children.

"Mom…! Dad…!" A familiar voice caught the attention of Tadao and Miki.

Through the crowd of devastated people still converging onto Ryoo High School, the two Hiiragi parents felt unprecedented waves of happiness and anger when they saw their oldest daughters, Inori and Matsuri push their way through the crowd towards them. Tadao had told them to wait at home for them but he knew what was going through his daughters' minds when he gave them that order. It was the ultimate torture test for them as all they could do was continue to watch the events unfold on a television knowing they couldn't be there for their parents if the absolute worst case scenario happened and Kagami and Tsukasa were both carried out of the school in body bags.

Even though Tadao was disappointed to see his oldest daughters arrive at the dangerous crime scene, he was still happy to see how much they cared about their two younger sisters and them, especially Miki. She opened her arms and embraced Inori and Matsuri as they cried with her and Tadao also hugged the three women closely in the middle of the bloody fracas.

"I…I had no other choice…! She was slowing us down! If she kept tagging along then you would've died!" Misao pleaded her case to Ayano with teary eyes as the orange-haired girl continued to look away, unable to look into Misao's eyes for what she did. "I didn't want to do it! Please Aya-chan! You have to believe me!"

"She was your friend, too…and you betrayed her." Ayano whispered, still upset over the fate of Patricia Martin. "I cannot even begin to imagine how scared she was when she saw you leave her like that…and for her final moments on Earth to be with a psychotic killer and not her friends or family. I would rather be dead than to know you sacrificed one of our friends to save me. You betrayed me too, Misao Kusakabe. I don't want us to be friends anymore."

Hearing this felt like a thousand knife wounds to Misao's heart. "I'm…I'm sorry…!"

"I'm not the one you should be apologizing too." Ayano replied and closed her eyes.

Misao quickly covered her face and cried loudly, though her public spectacle was overshadowed by the ongoing wails of agony from the other wounded students. As the student who donated his blood to Ayano identified as Minoru Shiraishi continued to sit with his arm in a sling, he heard a knock at the nurse's station door which was followed by a female voice.

"Is anyone in there? I'm hit and I need help." The female voice sounded petrified and on the verge of panicking so Minoru quickly acted.

He stood and quickly unlocked the door and met burgundy eyes.

"Thanks for the help you dumbass." The female voice sounded and it was followed by a gunshot that turned the nurse's office into a barrel of panic when they saw Minoru Shiraishi's head open in the back and he fell backwards in a bloody mess. It only became worse when Izumi Wakase stepped into the office, a deranged smile on her face as she held her pistol.

CHAPTER 8

As hard as she tried, Kagami Hiiragi couldn't get her younger sister to stop crying as they sat together in the back of the classroom with Konata and Miyuki. Kagami held Tsukasa closely in her lap as the youngest Hiiragi daughter continued to sob, though it was quiet and not loud enough to attract any unwanted attention. The strong twin-tailed girl held her sister closely while rocking her gently back and forth while humming their favorite childhood lullaby their mother used to sing for them when they were little. It helped soothe Tsukasa to a certain extent but the reality of their situation hindered her from becoming completely calm.

"I…I thought I would…never see you…again…sis…" Tsukasa whispered through her tears.

Kagami pulled her sister closer around her shoulders. "I'm here now, Tsukasa. I'm never going to leave you again."

Hearing this reassurance aided in quieting the crying Tsukasa in the hauntingly silent school, making the four girls speculate again if their terrifying ordeal was over. At least Tsukasa wasn't panicking anymore now that she knew her older sister was safe and with her. When Konata saw Kagami standing in the doorway, she wanted to cry as well but settled for a deep hug. It was enough to physically hold this twin-tailed girl and feel her heart beat wildly while continuing to shower her with its fiery passion and perseverance. After Kagami was allowed to reassure her sister for awhile, curiosity got the better of her friends and it was Konata who first asked Kagami the details of her expedition.

"Kagami…how did you survive through all of that?" The blue-haired girl asked as she hugged her legs to her chest.

"We were almost out of here. We were so close of escaping…my class and I." Kagami replied, still keeping a firm hold on Tsukasa. "We had the exits in our sights and then…the shooter cut us off. They opened fire on our entire class and there was a panic and everyone went in different directions. I have no idea where Kusakabe or Minegishi are. I just kept searching throughout the school until I ran into Sakuraba and she tried to get me out but I wouldn't leave without Tsukasa. I remember hearing the principal's words to stay inside your classrooms so I figured I'd try searching here before I would move on."

"We're glad you're here, Kagami-san." Miyuki added. "Our teacher was the first victim and it only took a few minutes for anarchy to set in and everyone except us tried to make a break for it."

Kagmai nodded. "I know…I came across a few bodies of students I recognized from your class. Let me guess, you were the leader here, Miyuki."

Miyuki nodded. "But only because Konata-san was busy caring

for Tsukasa-san and she asked what we should do. I believed that heeding the principal's words was the right thing to do."

Kagami nodded again. "Thank you…for keeping my sister safe."

Hearing this made Miyuki blush lightly. "Oh no, Kagami-san. If you're going to thank anyone, please thank Konata-san. She was the calmest out of all of us I believe. I have to be honest; I was terribly frightened and on the verge of panicking myself, but Konata-san was there for both of us."

Kagami shifted her eyes to her blue-haired friend, who still hugged herself tightly while keeping her green eyes focused on the floor in front of her. Though Konata was known for her outlandish and even at times impulsive personality, one thing she never faltered on was her commitment to her friends. Kagami knew this as well which prompted her to smile as Konata finally shifted her eyes to the twin-tailed girl after a brief silence among the group.

"Thank you…" Kagami whispered while keeping her smile.

Konata's only response was a slight nod and a small smirk.

Miyuki cleared her throat after Konata and Kagami gave their looks of gratitude. "Excuse me, but there is another issue that I have wanted to address with Konata-san for some time now. Konata-san, earlier you said that there are secrets and deceptions in this school and you might have an idea as to why this is happening to us."

Hearing this made Kagami look up while sounding a curious grunt.

"You also said that if your other friend, Tamura-san was here, she would also be able to give insight into this debacle. Please…I would very much appreciate it if you would elaborate further." Miyuki said while trying to sound assertive but at the same time didn't want to come off as an interrogator.

The three other girls turned their glances to Konata, who once again cast her eyes downward and paused. "The secrets and deceptions at Ryoo High School…they're a toxic combination for people like me…and Hiyorin…and Patty-chan…and others. I had always heard stories about what happens here, but I never believed it because quite frankly, I thought that middle school was so much of a damn nightmare that nothing would be able to top it. I was wrong. I was so wrong."

Kagami couldn't help but gasp lightly as she believed she knew where this was going. "Konata…were you…hazed?"

The twin-tailed girl's heart sank when she saw Konata's upper lip quiver in an emotion Kagami never thought was possible for the blue-haired girl. She saw nothing but sheer anger and hatred in her tightening frown as her lip continued to vibrate wildly. That was all the evidence the three other girls needed to know that their renowned Konata Izumi suffered from an unknown history of bullying, harassment, and persecution so vile that it couldn't be put into words. Even Konata's breathing changed to a deeper and aggressive pace, making Kagami gulp and Tsukasa and Miyuki gasp. Whatever Konata's history, it was clear that it was serious from the expressions on her face.

"Ko…Kona-chan…" Tsukasa whispered. "I…I had no idea…"

The short blue-haired girl pulled herself tighter. "So much has happened to people like me within these walls. You think I got into Ryoo because my dad gave me a few conditions on rewards regarding game consoles? Not a chance. When I read about Ryoo, I thought I would be with a more sophisticated and righteous crowd that would be more open to different ideas and lifestyles. I'll never forget the first time I was hazed. It was when I was a freshman and some upper class boys cornered me when they found out I liked dating sims. They thought I was promiscuous. They assumed that because I liked those kinds of games that I had no sense of honor…so they jumped me."

Hearing this awful revelation upset Tsukasa and Miyuki but it angered Kagami. The twin-tailed girl tried to hide her anger when she asked, "Did…did they…?"

"Did they assault me? No." Konata was quick to reply. "One just held me down while five others moved their hands towards my body and made gestures that they were going to touch me or rip my clothes off and throw me into a hallway. I was so scared…but they were all bluff. They just wanted to 'have some fun' with me, according to their words."

"Konata-san…I'm so sorry…" Miyuki whispered and outstretched her gentle hands to comfort her.

"I hated you, Miyuki." Konata suddenly said with her eyes still fixated on the floor, making Miyuki freeze. "I hated you for a while until I could finally trust you."

"Konata!" Kagami exclaimed.

Konata continued regardless of Kagami's objection to the cold reaction to Miyuki's kindness. "I hated her because she came from the upscale side of the student body. The upscale demographic of the school has this secret club that they called The Hunt Club and its sole purpose was to haze students they saw as 'lesser' or unworthy of going to Ryoo. It's not one of those clubs that humiliates a student and then posts the results or reactions online because then it's not only public knowledge, it's incriminating knowledge, which shows how smart these punks are. As you know, Ryoo has some very distinguished alumni."

Miyuki nodded. "I was aware of that, yes. Are…are you saying that these people…"

"It's all about status." Konata quickly finished.

"But…but I never heard of such a grotesque club." Miyuki said with rare frustration in her voice.

Konata nodded. "I know. It's because the others who are in it thought you were too kind and too accepting of others to be in it so they keep its membership secret. Still, there are countless other instances where people like me have been hazed and mistreated. I remember this one freshman student named Izumi

Wakase and all the torment she was put through."

Kagami looked up upon hearing the name. "Wakase? You mean the girl who is class president of Yu-chan's class?"

Konata nodded. "Poor girl. I think she had it the worst out of all of us put together. You know that she comes from an upscale background like Miyuki? Well that turned out to be her own undoing instead of her safety net. Her parents are these two grueling, demanding people that expect everything to be perfect; whether it's their home, their yard, their social status, or even their own children. Wakase used to open up to me in the beginning of the school year about no matter how hard or how much she tried, she could never please her parents, especially her mother. Wakase's mother had to second guess everything she did and if you weren't as good as she was then you were damned to Hell. It was always something. Whether her grades weren't good enough even though she was practically a straight A student, or if she wasn't in enough extracurricular activities and even if she was, they weren't the 'right' ones according to her mother. Nothing ever satisfied her and Wakase was almost always in tears whenever she talked about it."

"What happened to her, Kona-chan?" Tsukasa asked as she dried her eyes.

Konata sighed deeply. "It turned out that she was a closet otaku. It was her one secret passion that helped her cope with a lot of the hardships she was dealt, but Hiyori accidently found her out on one of her shopping trips. Wakase promised Hiyorin not to tell, but things like that have ways of getting out anyways. When it was discovered that an upper-class girl like Izumi Wakase was an otaku, you would think that she would be accepted by her own kind without question. Once again, we were wrong."

"Then she fell victim to the club, too." Kagami added with remorse.

Konata nodded again. "She got it the worst because of her upper status. The orchestrators of the club thought that if they let her slide, it would invite more outside cultures that they found either

demeaning or a threat to their pecking order. They decided to make her an example."

"What…what did they do to her?" Tsukasa reluctantly asked.

"I think the bigger question is what didn't they do to her?" Konata sharply replied. "They made her stand at the corner of one of Saitama's busiest corners at rush hour while holding her skirt up and she wasn't allowed to wear any underwear. Next, they took her bento box when she was in-between classes, threw out the food, and dropped a dead rat in it for her to find later. Another one of the club members 'accidently' poured paint in her long hair when she was struggling through another art class. Wakase also had a secret passion for 'cute' things like stuffed animals and had a large collection in her room so one time they even went so far to break into her home, steal all the stuffed animals, and videotaped burning them all. Another time some of them poured ink in her coffee when she wasn't looking and it stained her teeth and mouth black."

Tsukasa was once again in tears upon hearing of the horrid treatment of the victimized Izumi Wakase. Despite the fact that she was in high school and on the verge of becoming a college student in a few months, hearing such grotesque treatment of another human was something that she was never prepared or able to take. She often wanted to think of herself as a mature young woman, but she still naively believed that there was no evil in the world and that everyone had the capacity to treat each other as they should be. Hearing all of these horrendous acts being committed against another person sent shockwaves of fear throughout her body and mind, making her contemplate if she even wanted to go to college or leave the family shrine.

"My god…I had no idea." Kagami whispered as she pulled Tsukasa closer when she felt her sister tremble from the story. "That poor girl. To think, she could be out there right now, running and terrified just like us. She could even be…"

Konata tightened her stare at the floor. "…Yeah…"

Because Kagami's attention was devoted to her sister at the

moment, she didn't catch the depth of Konata's tone when she replied. When Konata gave her response, she didn't sound like she agreed with Kagami's assertions that she was probably another victim of this school shooting. Instead, her response sounded like it was deep with speculation and uncertainties, meaning that Konata could possibly know more than what she was divulging to her friends. Regardless, Miyuki herself felt cornered and exposed as a result of her status and how Konata felt about her in the beginning despite the fact that she didn't do anything wrong, so she said nothing.

Suddenly, another gunshot was heard nearby, grabbing the three girls' attention. Kagami took the initiative and said, "That one sounds like it was coming from the nurse's office. God be with them..."

The screaming intensified from the terrified students as they saw their male classmate lie dead on the floor as Izumi Wakase slowly stepped in with her pistol in her hand. All the students that could move began to let their panic do their talking as they began to climb and claw over each other to find an escape route. It didn't take them long to see that they were trapped in a small room with a psychotic killer, which only created a mutated smile on Wakase's face. She took in all of their looks of fear and horror. She could see some of them whispering for their parents to swoop in and save them while others simply prayed, knowing their number was just called. It was delightful for her to see their tears of fear and sorrow. Never had she known true power until now and she had to admit...she loved it.

Izumi Wakase slowly turned her head to the body of Minoru Shiraishi and stared at the lifeless corpse for several seconds, reveling in the adrenaline rush she felt of taking another life. Slowly turning her head back to the trembling and wounded crowd forming a giant mass together at the back of the room, her grin deepened.

Her voice was like a thousand fingernails against a blackboard when she opened her mouth and hissed, "Are you scared?"

The crowd was too scared to speak and their only response was to continue to cry and beg for their lives. This only infuriated

Wakase and her insanity reared its ugly head again when she raised the gun above her and fired a shot into the ceiling and making a small section of it fall around her.

"Goddamn it, I asked if you were scared, you decrepit little maggot inbred motherfuckers!" Wakase screamed so loudly that it rivaled the bang of her gun.

At once, the herded group nodded in a synchronized act while some even wailed that yes they were in fact scared to death. Seeing these endless amounts of fear and mental suffering from her fellow pupils added to the ecstatic rush of adrenaline and pleasure Wakase was taking in this bloodbath. Their screams were like the soothing sounds of a wind chime blowing in a summer breeze to her as her sadistic smirk returned.

"Good…then welcome to my world." She replied with a look only a demon of the underworld would be able formulate on their face.

One of the wounded students on a bed who was too weak to move on their own slowly looked over to Wakase. His eyes were told that her rifle's bullets in his body were finishing the job on him but it still didn't take away from the shock he felt upon seeing the identity of the Ryoo High School shooter.

Coughing up a bit of blood, the wounded boy whispered, "You… you're the shooter…? But you're a…a…"

To everyone's horror, Wakase began to step closer to the boy until she stood above him and she lowered herself down to him. Her placid face was only inches away from his and she replied, "I'm a what?"

"You're a…girl…" he whispered back, almost oblivious to the danger.

Wakase's facial response was once again surprisingly complacent. "What? You think a girl can't have a bad day…or a hundred or so, too? You've heard of a menstruation cycle, haven't you? Tell me

something…do you have parents that love you?"

The boy was barely able to hear the first half of Wakase's response but was able to comprehend her last question. As the frightened students watched, the boy coughed again and replied, "Yes. They love me very much. Please…make sure I love them, too."

Wakase's stare transformed into a glare and she quickly retorted, "No."

The crazed gunwoman quickly raised her pistol to the boy's right temple and pulled the trigger, once again sending a deafening bang throughout the nurse's station and making the boy's head explode in a red and pink confetti show, sending everyone into a screaming panic again. Wakase slowly stood, her face covered in the boy's blood though she remained completely inert about it as she smiled again. It sickened some when they saw her lick her lips, wiping them of the blood.

The deranged female shooter once again backed away from the bed that held her latest victim and scanned the crowd. The students expected to hear her taunt them or maybe even threaten them all before she would open fire but that's not what fate was going to have in store for them. Instead, Wakase scanned the crowd and when she saw the wounded Ayano Minegishi resting on the last bed, her smirk deepened and she turned her eyes back to the crowd.

"Where's Misao Kusakabe?" She asked calmly through her blood-stained stare. "I know she's here. Surrender her now and I won't kill anyone else…except her."

Hearing the offer prompted the students to quickly look around. Most of the students Wakase had cornered in the nurse's office were first and second years so they had no idea who Misao Kusakabe was. The brown-haired girl however began to sweat as she hid herself behind several other students with her eyes darting in every direction. She could feel her heart pounding like a drum as she heard the students she was using as a shield continue to ask around for her and she feared at any second she

would be spotted.

"Well anytime now, goddamn it!" Wakase snapped and tightened her grip on her weapon. "I know she's here. She never goes anywhere without her little friend, Ayano Minegishi over there. Hey Aya-chan, say hello to everyone!"

The orange-haired girl was still too weak to move on her own. She was deathly scared though for her friend and continued to breathe deep, letting the late Minoru Shiraishi's blood do its work inside her. Ayano wanted to stand up to Wakase for Misao despite what she did to Patty but her weakened condition hindered her from being able to formulate a complete sentence let alone standing up to a psycho with a gun.

When the crowd was coming up emptyhanded in their search for Misao Kusakabe, Izumi Wakase decided it was time to take drastic measures. She slowly walked over to Ayano Minegishi and raised her deadly weapon without any remorse and placed the hot barrel on the wounded girl's head. She began to put more pressure on her head, making her wince in pain.

"Misao Kusakabe has exactly five seconds to step forward or she'll be mopping up her own friend's brains." Wakase hissed with a grin and moved her finger to the trigger as Ayano cried silently and closed her eyes. "One…two…three…four…five. Time's up!"

"Misa-chan!" Ayano screamed.

"Wait!" A voice cried from the crowd, prompting Wakase to stop pulling her trigger.

The crowd of huddled and trembling students parted, showing a shaking girl covered in blood with brown hair, golden eyes, and was a crying mess. Misao Kusakabe slowly walked away from the crowd as Izumi Wakase grinned and moved her pistol away from Ayano's head. The childhood friend of Ayano Minegishi stood before the murderous female student as she continued to weep. She had just surrendered herself to the Ryoo High School shooter and she had a pretty good idea of how this was going to end for her.

"Nice to see you again, Kusakabe." Wakase sneered with a satisfied smirk. "Well…turn around and look your friend in the eyes. Can't you see she's scared, you selfish bitch?"

Misao slowly turned and looked down at Ayano, both of them spilling tears. So much Misao wanted to say, yet she didn't have the courage to say half of it. She wanted to thank Ayano for always being a friend to her, for always being there, for making her brother so happy, and for being able to overlook all of her shortcomings, except for one regarding Patricia Martin.

"Aya-chan…"

"Misa-chan…"

Smirking at the heartbreaking sight, Ayano's fear rose and she became flustered when she saw Wakase slowly raise her handgun and push the barrel against the back of Misao's head. The deranged gunwoman simply said, "Remember The Hunt Club? I do."

Misao's eyes went big as she continued to stare at Ayano. "Is…is that what this is about? Look…I'm sorry I did all those things to you. It wasn't right."

"You stole my bra and panties at gym class during shower time and threw them to a bunch of seniors in the hallway. Do you know what it's like trying to get your undergarments back from half a dozen testosterone-fueled retards? It wasn't fun. You did that, Misao Kusakabe. You did that."

"I said I'm sorry, Wakase-san. I know that doesn't mean much now but it's true. I truly am sorry." Misao replied, still with her eyes flooded with tears.

Silence fell between them until Wakase tightened her throat. "If you're truly sorry…tell me where I can find Kagami Hiiragi."

Misao's eyes nearly exploded upon hearing the request. "Hi…

Hiiragi…?! No, not that, Wakase-san! Anything but that! Leave her out of it! She had nothing to do with the other times we harassed you! Don't do it!"

"Oh it's not Kagami I want to kill…it's her sister I want. Besides… I have my own reasons for wanting to kill her." Wakase replied coldly. "Tell me…or I'll retract my offer to spare Minegishi and I'll kill her right now."

Wakase moved the pistol out of Misao's hair, making her think she was actually going to shoot Ayano but it was all a ploy. Misao fell for it instantly and she wailed loudly for Wakase not to kill her best friend since kindergarten. Despite Ayano's gestures not to listen to Wakase, Misao sighed and talked.

"I…I don't know where she is…but her sister is probably still hiding in their teacher's homeroom…Ms. Kuroi's class. If her little sister is there…she'll be there, too." Misao confessed and began to cry.

Wakase simply smiled. "Thank you, Misa-chan. By the way, do you still have your school ID in your locker?"

Misao wiped her tears away with confusion. "Ye…yes."

"Thanks again. Goodbye, Misao Kusakabe." Izumi Wakase finished.

Over Ayano Minegishi's cries of objection, Izumi Wakase pulled the trigger and sent another bullet into the back of Misao Kusakabe's head, killing her instantly. To the orange-haired girl's further horror, the body of her friend fell forward and landed on top of her as Misao's body continued to bleed all over her. The students trapped in the nurse's office continued to scream loudly despite the fact that Izumi Wakase kept her end of the deal and didn't kill Ayano Minegishi. Instead, she fulfilled the second half of her promise and left the blood-soaked nurse's office and headed back for the senior's hall with the final part of her insidious plot in mind. She had one final target to peg before the bomb went off.

CHAPTER 9

The stressed and exhausted Yui Narumi continued to breathe deeply in fruitless attempts to quell her seemingly endless panic. Her eyes burned as they watched the ambulance carrying her uncle finally maneuver through the crowd and make its way to the highway where it would take him to the nearest hospital for surgery. His fate was unknown to her and she couldn't help but feel that she was trapped in a fog of war scenario, which the gruesome scene around her would add credibility to the war concept. Now was the time where Yui's mentality would be tested the most with the infinite questions that flooded her mind that didn't carry a single answer.

What if her uncle didn't make it? Her radio clipped to her uniform continued to crackle news about the local hospitals around Saitama saying they were already completely overrun with victims of the shooting. It became more horrifying for her when she heard that students were dying of their wounds in the waiting rooms waiting to be operated on. The unofficial statistic of the dead at the Ryoo High School shooting was bouncing up and down between thirty and forty by this point with nearly a hundred students still missing or lost in the fog of war. So far, the police, paramedics, and even the doctors couldn't even agree on a specific number for the amount of wounded. Another question Yui couldn't help but ponder was what would become of Konata if the absolute worst would happen to her father?

Yui turned back to her little sister, who was still sitting on the curb near a parked car that was riddled with bullets from Wakase's aerial attack. She was still physically shaking from the worst day of her life that still wasn't over. So far she witnessed her best friend take a bullet for her, she had faced the attacker, felt the weight of someone throwing their life away to save her, dodged death a third time when Wakase attacked from the window, and watched her sister perform borderline ineffective CPR on her uncle as he bled all over her. The female officer sighed and slowly walked back to her sister and sat down next to her while pulling her close.

It broke Yui's heart to feel her sister tremble like a rattle while at the same time attempting to remain brave. The police officer

could see her sister trying to hold in her tears, making her face flush a shade of swelling red as she struggled to keep her breathing steady. Another dreadful possibility that had the potential of becoming a devastating truth was the idea that Minami Iwasaki wasn't going to come out of the school alive. The bodies were still piling up at the hospitals and the schoolyard, not to mention the ones that were already dead inside the school but haven't been recovered yet. Statistically speaking, where the shooting first began, and Yutaka's testimony of what happened in her classroom were all painting grim outcomes.

"Yutaka, listen. A lot has happened here today and I think you should go home. Our mom already knows you're safe and with me so one more phone call and she'll be here to pick you up." Yui said as she rubbed her sister's shoulders.

Trying to stay brave, Yutaka quickly shook her head and refused the offer to leave the bloody and chaotic warzone. "No! I already said I'm not leaving, not without Minami!"

Yui sighed again and pulled her tighter, trying to make her feel more comforted for the opinion she felt she needed to share. "Yutaka…I already ran her name through all the victim lists at the hospitals and she's not at any of them. I asked around with the other officers and paramedics attending the students on the schoolyard and she's not there either. That can only mean she's still somewhere in the school and if she is…there's a great possibility that she's already—"

Yui halted her sentence when she saw the look of pure shattered emotions on her little sister's face. Her lips were quivering and her eyes could no longer contain the vast amounts of water filling them and they leaked as her face continued to burn red. The frail girl knew where her big sister was going with her final thought and it was too devastating for Yutaka to even contemplate. Minami Iwasaki was not only her first friend in high school, she was without a doubt the best friend she ever had and she felt like family to Yutaka. Seeing that her own big sister was already willing to call it quits and give up hope didn't help manage Yutaka's stress.

"Onee-chan…how could you…?" Yutaka whispered with a sniff.

"I can only be as optimistic as reality will let me be, Yutaka. I talked to my commanding officer and he believes that the number of dead will be at triple digits before today is over." Yui replied, still keeping a warm and loving grip around her sister's shoulders. "Look, I'm not saying that Minami is…for lack of a better term; another statistic. However, I need you to be strong and realistic about this situation. Minami is still in that school and I want you to keep the possibility in mind that she could already be dead."

"No, no, no, no, no, no!" Yutaka screamed while holding her ears and shaking her head back and forth wildly. "Stop it! Just stop it! Minami isn't dead! She's alive, do you hear me?! Alive!"

"I hear you, I hear you! Calm down!" Yui tried to contain her flailing sister though her tantrum wasn't even noticed by the rest of the crowd as the pandemonium marched on. "I already said I'm not saying Minami is already dead, but there are still wounded and dead students in that school, Yutaka, and the killer is still in there as well."

Yutaka quickly turned her head, still venting more broken emotions. "When are you and the police going to be allowed to storm the school?! They're still dying in there and all of you are just standing around!"

"I told you already. My orders, as well as everyone else's, are to hold our position around the perimeter and wait for the Special Assault Team to arrive." Yui replied, trying to keep her own stress levels down despite the situations with the crime scene and her sister. "They're the ones who are trained to deal with assailants with weaponry like that and they'll rescue the remaining students inside."

Wiping away a tear, Yutaka whispered, "But…when…?"

Yui quickly looked away at her wristwatch and scowled at how much time had passed. The responders from the SAT were supposed to have been there by now but she also knew that mobilizing a unit like theirs did take time and resources, not to

mention the horribly unique circumstances they were responding to. It wasn't every day that an elite tactical unit was called to one of its country's own schools to take down a deranged student with an arsenal of powerful weapons. Either way, Yui knew this was unacceptable and knew her supervisor's orders were killing people.

Damn…where the hell are those assholes? How long does it take to hop into a helicopter and storm a building? It would be easier if I assembled men myself and stormed that place. Either way, when the dust settles from this one, every responding department is going to be buried in paperwork and legal investigations for years.

"Onee-chan…when are they going to save Minami and the others?" Yutaka whispered through her tears. "Why is your supervisor ordering you to stay put and not help anyone? Doesn't he realize he's letting more students die?"

Yutaka asked well-warranted questions and she deserved even better answers, but unfortunately Yui couldn't give them to her. The shooting at Ryoo High School was nothing short of a nightmare in more ways than one. When it began, no one knew how to deal with an atrocity of this scale and every hospital was unprepared to admit so many gunshot wounds that it completely took every available surgeon by storm.

On top of that, the police commissioners and supervisors were never dealt such a grim hand before. It was a matter of office politics when they ordered their men to stay outside and out of harm's way while defenseless students were being mowed down by streams of bullets. They wanted all the credibility for keeping the situations outside the school under control, yet none of the liability by throwing them into the bullets to save the students, even though most of them wanted to being that some were parents themselves. Of course, Izumi Wakase's window ambush took that hope and kicked it to the curb.

"Yutaka…I wish I could tell you more than what I already know…but I can't." Yui said with remorse while refusing to give up on her sister's hopes. "Please, let me call mom again and I'll stay with you until she arrives to pick you up."

The salmon-haired girl still remained defiant. "I saw Minami's mother speaking to a news crew a few minutes earlier. She held a picture of her up to the camera and literally begged anyone watching the news to help find her. I know how bad this situation is. Tamura-san sacrificed herself to save me so I want to be here for not only Minami's mother, but also Tamura-san's parents and two brothers when the rescuers are finally able to retrieve her body. I want them to know personally that their daughter is a hero."

Yui couldn't help but admire her sister's bravery and righteousness. Even though she was still a first year at high school and already went through a horrifically traumatizing event, Yutaka could still see and comprehend the selfless actions of others. What made Yui even more proud of her sister was the fact that despite the ongoing danger of the scene she was at, she still wanted to defy it and be there as emotional support for the families of the people she truly cared about. Most people would jump at the offer to leave the bloody surroundings but Yutaka had both her principles and priorities in mind over her own health. Yui pulled her sister close and kissed her on the top of her head to show how proud she was of her.

A voice suddenly crackled over Yui's radio calling her and she quickly stood and distanced herself from Yutaka as she feared it was concerning Minami. "Narumi this is Tajiri, come back." The voice said.

"Narumi here, over." Yui replied.

"Narumi, I think I've got a lead on that student you were searching for. Could you run that physical description by me again and where she was hit, over?" Her fellow police officer requested.

Yui gulped before she retorted, "Iwasaki, Minami, short green hair, blue eyes, about 163 centimeters tall and a slender build. She had a gunshot wound on her left side, over."

The female officer paused and waited with her heart pounding,

fearing the worst. "Yeah I think I have a lead on her. A wounded student on the schoolyard gave testimony saying a girl matching that description and wound was still inside the school and was still alive, over."

"Is that all they said, over?"

"Negative. They said that Iwasaki used two uniform tops to tie around her wound as an improvised tourniquet and was helping students escape and helping to provide treatment." The voice over the radio replied. "Last witness testified stated she was hiding several students from the assailant in a locker room near the gymnasium, over."

"Roger that, that's good news. Keep me informed if the situation changes, out." Yui finished and felt much better knowing Minami Iwasaki was still alive and despite the fact she was wounded, she was still doing her best to save the lives of other students.

Yui turned back to Yutaka to deliver the good news about her green-haired friend, but it wasn't meant to be. The spot on the curb where she had left her little sister was now vacant and it sent Yui's heart into overdrive, prompting her to look around frantically for the salmon-haired girl. Her worst fears became a pulsing reality when she finally spotted Yutaka running full speed through the crowd back towards the school. It was abundantly clear that Yutaka overheard everything on the radio and was now taking matters into her own hands.

"Yutaka…!" Yui screamed as she chased after her little sister but kept bumping into the seas of human bodies also lost in the confusion as her sister crossed the yellow police tape.

She continued to run and zipped past paramedics attending wounded students on the schoolyard as Yui's distressed voice became lost in the endless clamor of chaotic noise around Ryoo High School. When she saw her little sister disappear into the school once again, she fought back the urge to collapse as she got back on her radio and informed her supervisor and the supporting units that her sister was in the school again. She also requested permission to pursue into the school and engage in

deadly force if she encountered the shooter.

Yui could no longer contain herself as a professional when she was denied all her requests and to continue carrying out her current orders, which was strictly to hold the perimeter outside. Without a doubt, this was the single worst day of not only Yui Narumi's career in law enforcement, but also in general. Her sister was once in harm's way but when she was safe, she put herself back in the line of fire and her uncle's fate was out of her hands. The worst part was that there was nothing she could do about any of it. The sister side of her was telling her to chase after Yutaka and bring her back out, but the police officer in her was telling her to obey her orders and hold the perimeter. The civil war in her head was raging wildly and she had to ask herself which side was ultimately going to win?

Yutaka retraced her steps through the school and eventually came to the hallway where she and Hiyori encountered the shooter. The salmon-haired girl's heart pounded and her breathing deepened as she neared the corner and expected to round it and see the body of her friend who sacrificed herself for her. With one final deep breath, Yutaka looked around the corner and saw it was empty, and so was the spot where Izumi Wakase cornered them.

She gasped loudly and dashed down the hallway and arrived at the same spot where she was convinced she would find Hiyori Tamura's body but it was empty. Yutaka looked around the spot and didn't find anything that could link the spot to a murder scene. No blood or bullet casings could be located and it raised her hopes even more upon learning that Minami was still alive.

"Is Tamura-san still…alive as well?" Yutaka couldn't help but ask herself out loud upon concluding that she was nowhere to be found.

Yutaka looked around and suddenly spotted something familiar on the floor. Hiyori's broken glasses were resting on the floor, prompting Yutaka to bend down and pick them up. She still kept looking around and kept convincing herself that her other friend was still alive, prompting her to keep searching and navigate to the gymnasium. However, she was going to have to pass her

cousin's classroom on the way and unbeknownst to her, another student from her class was fast approaching the room.

Still huddled together in the classroom of the late Nanako Kuroi, Konata, Kagami, Tsukasa, and Miyuki continued to exchange ideas of what they believed was the best course of action. They kept staring at the ticking clock and it was becoming clear that help wasn't going to show up anytime soon. They were still unaware of the bureaucratic nightmare for the police outside and how they wanted to storm the school and rescue the rest of the students, but the higher-ups said otherwise. The Special Assault Team was on their way, but when they would actually arrive was a whole other subject.

"We only heard those four shots come from the nurse's office so what if students in there were able to wrestle the shooter to the ground? I haven't heard any automatic fire from that rifle since that last barrage so I still think they're out of ammo for that weapon." Kagami sounded her opinion.

"Please sis, don't do anything that would put yourself in danger." Tsukasa quickly replied and tightened her grip on Kagami's uniform. "I just got you back. You said you weren't going to leave me again."

Kagami nodded and hugged Tsukasa again. "I promise I'll always be with you. You know what? I want you to think of a good meal to help cook for us tonight when we get out of here. We'll cook it together and you can show me the ropes. How does that sound?"

Tsukasa smiled deeply and happily. "That sounds great! I always wanted to cook with you, sis."

"Tsukasa! You're already in danger! Why would you put yourself back into it by eating your sister's cooking?!" Konata exclaimed flamboyantly.

"Shut up you!" Kagami retorted with a clenched fist and gritting teeth while Miyuki giggled lightly.

For once though, Kagami didn't take any offense to what Konata said. She could see that the blue-haired girl was only trying to keep Tsukasa calm under the circumstances, which she greatly appreciated. Kagami and Konata could see that keeping their old patterns and routines going despite the situation outside their door was enough to keep everyone calm and to keep panic from setting in. It was to a point where the twin-tailed and blue-haired girl could read each other's thoughts and body language clearer than an open book. Thus, it only showed how close they had become over the years and they didn't think much of it, but they were bounded together in more ways than just friendship. All of their priorities and objectives for each other were the same and they only had the best for each other at heart, as well as the ones they loved.

"Still, I do wonder where everyone is." Miyuki couldn't help but speculate, grabbing the others' attention. "Everyone knows what's happening here, yet we're still all alone. I'm starting to wonder if Kagami-san may be justified in her thinking that it would be easier to try and escape as a group."

Kagami nodded. "I mean we're all together now and we can only hope the others made it out safely, too. The only thing we know is that the shooter is somewhere near the nurse's office so going to the most direct exit would be a mistake. What if we took the longer way to the next one near the gymnasium? It would be a longer hike, but we would still have a better chance of making it."

Miyuki was intrigued by the idea and turned her attention to the others for their input. "Well…what do you think Konata-san and Tsukasa-san?"

"I just want to be with sis, that's all." Tsukasa said with a whimper of fear regarding the thought of leaving the classroom.

Before Konata could give her two cents on the matter, they heard a rustle outside, prompting them to cease their conversation and tremble in fear. They could hear the footsteps but they weren't consistent. Instead, they sounded like the feet were being dragged with every step and they could also hear a human body bumping against the wall outside. It was a confusing chain of

sounds until they heard the human plop against the other side of the barricaded door.

It was followed by an even more disturbing silence until Kagami slowly rose to her feet and Tsukasa followed, still keeping her tight grip on her sister. When the twin-tailed girl began to walk over to the door, Konata and Miyuki quickly sprung to their feet and objected. They saw Kagami's body language and knew what her intentions were.

"Kagami, don't. It could be a trick." Konata hissed quietly, grabbing Kagami's attention.

"What are you talking about? Someone is out there and needs our help." Kagami hissed back and proceeded towards the door again.

Tsukasa suddenly tightened her grip on her sister and held her back. "Sis, no. Don't open that door!"

"Please listen to your sister, Kagami-san." Miyuki added. "We don't know who that is and it could be a trick."

Kagami lowered her eyebrows to form a glare at them. "You opened that door for me."

"That's different, sis. We knew it was you." Tsukasa's trembling voice illustrated her fear.

A look of shock and hurt showed itself on Kagami's face and she slowly shook her head. "Unbelievable. Just because we're trapped in this place with the killer doesn't mean we have to help him."

Kagami turned again and began to walk towards the door and Tsukasa quickly let go of her sister and backed away as she trembled and breathed deeply while her eyes trembled. Miyuki was there to comfort her as Konata took a position in front of them, as if she was going to guard them if this went bad.

The twin-tailed girl gulped one more time before she gently slid Kuroi's desk to the side while moving a few more obstacles and unlocked the door. She slowly slid it open just a crack and peered outside, expecting to be met with either another dead and bloodied body or the barrel of a gun. However, her eyes quickly spotted another female student sitting on the floor rubbing her head covered by her long, dark hair. When the student lifted her head and revealed her face, Kagami nearly exploded in both excitement and relief.

"Hiyori!" Kagami exclaimed as she ripped the door open and lifting the spirits of the three other girls in the classroom. The twin-tailed girl dashed into the massacred hallway, grabbed Hiyori by her arm, and helped her into the classroom.

When Kagami helped the long-haired girl into the classroom, Miyuki and Tsukasa also assisted in helping her. Hiyori was struggling to stay awake and was bleeding slightly from her a gash on her head. The group was so busy tending to their unexpected visitor that they forgot to rebuild the barricade or even close and lock the classroom door.

"Hiyorin, can you hear me?" Konata asked as she bent to her knee and snapped her fingers in front of the groggy Hiyori. "What happened to you?"

After several failed attempts at formulating a sentence, Hiyori was able to shake her head a bit and formed a piece of intelligence that Konata would be thrilled to hear. "I…I got…Yu-chan…out of here. She's safe."

Konata smiled with deep gratitude and patted her friend on the shoulder. "I owe you big time, Hiyorin. But what happened to you? Was it the shooter? Is it…you know who?"

Hearing the last sentence prompted Kagami, Tsukasa, and Miyuki to give confused and even concerned looks at Konata. The last part of her questions for Hiyori was unusually specific and it was then that Miyuki was certain that Konata was keeping information from them regarding the ongoing shooting. She readied herself to call Konata out on this but Hiyori's sudden

movements stopped her.

The dark-haired girl's eyes nearly popped out of her head when a memory suddenly flashed in her brain. She remembered exactly what Izumi Wakase said to her before she was knocked unconscious. The five girls were sitting on top of a massive powder keg and their time was almost up. Hiyori's crackled voice uttered, "Get out…gonna blow…"

Hiyori's eyes rolled into the back of her head and her body went limp, making Tsukasa gasp and nearly scream in horror when she asked, "Is…is she…dead…?"

Miyuki felt Hiyori's pulse and felt the bump on her head and shook her head. "No she's not dead, Tsukasa-san. She just has a concussion and is asleep. Something or someone must've really hit her hard to cause this to happen."

As they tried to piece the puzzle together and analyze what Hiyori's last words meant, they didn't see another student step into the open doorframe dressed in her summer uniform like the rest of her fellow students were that day. However, she formed a sadistic grin as she watched the oblivious group from behind and eyed the youngest Hiiragi twin with the yellow ribbon in her hair. The girl standing in the doorframe slowly reached behind her back and grasped the pistol nestled in the waistband of her skirt.

CHAPTER 10

Acting on her natural instincts, Miyuki untied her yellow ribbon on the front of her uniform top and applied it to Hiyori's wound on her head. Miyuki could tell the unconscious long-haired girl had a nasty gash on her head that could only be created by trauma from a blunt object. She was hit with such physical viciousness that it could've killed her and it was clear to them that it was the shooter that did it. One thing that neither Miyuki, Konata, Kagami, nor Tsukasa could figure out was why the assailant just didn't shoot her instead of going an unusual direction by knocking her out.

"He…hello…?" A new voice said behind the four girls, nearly making them go into cardiac arrest because it was when they heard the tone that made them remember they forgot to rebuild the barricade.

They quickly spun around and locked stares with a female student with long hair reaching to the backs of her knees and also had burgundy eyes and was dressed in a Ryoo High School summer uniform. She looked physically and mentally exhausted, as if she was put through the ringer like the rest of them and was now seeking asylum. The four girls recognized this student but it was Konata who rose to her feet first and gave a confused look.

"Wa…Wakase…" Konata whispered. "You're…you're okay…?"

Wakase nodded fiercely and looked around the classroom. "Is…is it okay to come in? There's a real psychopath in the school."

Konata squinted her green eyes at her with suspicion and began to analyze every part of her. Wakase was dressed in her summer uniform like the rest of the students and was covered in sweat and was clearly out of breath. However, Konata tightened her squint when she looked down and saw her feet. They were covered in knee-high socks but no shoes, raising more suspicions about Izumi Wakase in Konata's mind.

"Yes, please come in and quickly close the door." Kagami warmly invited and she didn't have to say it twice as Izumi Wakase stepped further in and turned to it. She closed it and because no one could see her face, she grinned maliciously in the shadow her body created when she locked the door.

When the shaken Izumi Wakase turned again, she once again presented a distraught face that told a story of pure hardships and scarring events that would haunt her forever. The face she gave would blend right in with the wounded students and parents outside, arising no suspicions from either Kagami, Tsukasa, or Miyuki. Konata however was still skeptical as her face showed.

"You're okay?" Konata asked again, this time perking curiosity

from the other four girls and their looks showed it.

"Ye…yes. Yes, I'm fine. I'm just shaken up and I'm very scared." Wakase whispered with fright in her voice.

"I understand but that's not what I'm asking. Are you…okay? Are you really okay? Really?" Konata's questions seemed too repetitive.

"I'm sorry Konata, but I don't understand." Wakase whispered as she hugged herself and looked away with her frightened face. "I…I just want to hide. That's all."

Konata once again glanced down at Wakase's sock-covered feet with curiosity. "Wakase…what happened to your shoes?"

Wakase looked down at her feet and back up with her face displaying more tears. "They fell off when I was running from the shooter. He…he…he almost…killed me…!"

Tsukasa quickly stood and walked over to the trembling Wakase also with teary eyes. The story Konata told of the torment Izumi Wakase suffered at the hands of The Hunt Club was still fresh in the mind of the youngest Hiiragi twin, making her comforting and feminine side present itself. She hugged Wakase tightly and allowed her tears to fall.

"Wak…Wakase-san…" Tsukasa whispered with an emotional choke, confusing Wakase. "You're safe now. You're with friends. You'll never have to suffer again."

In a dramatic show of acting skills, Izumi Wakase's eyes flooded and she allowed herself to cry in the loving embrace of Tsukasa Hiiragi. The two girls hugged each other tightly and cried, prompting Miyuki to stand up from the sleeping Hiyori Tamura and also rear her maternal side. She did her best to comfort the two hurt girls as they continued to hug while Kagami pulled Konata back and to the side.

"Hey, what was that about earlier? About her being okay."

Kagami whispered.

Konata kept her eyes on Izumi Wakase and continued to try and analyze her every emotional display. Everything the brown-haired girl vented seemed to be genuine and she truly appeared to be upset over being trapped in the school with the shooter. Konata couldn't sense any hostile or negative waves coming from her and the blue-haired girl shook her head and turned back to Kagami.

"It…it was nothing. I thought I sensed something about her earlier but I guess it was nothing. I think being stuck in here is finally going to my head." Konata whispered back.

Kagami's stern look softened and she nodded. "I understand."

Tsukasa and Miyuki released Wakase from their loving embraces and the youngest Hiiragi twin took the hand of their group's latest addition and walked her away from the door. The unconscious body of Hiyori Tamura suddenly caught Wakase's eyes. No one else in the room noticed the quick scowl of anger and frustration nor the angry eye twitch from Wakase when she saw Hiyori.

"Hi…Hiyorin? What happened to her?" Wakase asked once again with convincing concern in her voice.

Tsukasa shook her head while still leading Wakase. "We don't know. We found her stumbling around outside in the hallway with that horrible wound on her head. She said that something was going to blow before she passed out. Do you know what she means, Wakase-san?"

Wakase shook her head. "No. I have no idea what she's talking about. I…I was in the bathroom when all of this started. I've been trying to get out but…but I found Patty-chan."

Hearing the name caught the attention of everyone else and they anxiously awaited the news of her fate. "Is she okay?" Kagami asked.

Wakase formed another tear in her eye and shook her head. "No…she was shot in the head twice. She's dead."

The devastating news broke Tsukasa down as she released Wakase's hand and covered her face while crying. Kagami's sisterly instincts kicked in and she rushed over to comfort her upset sibling as Miyuki also tried to remain strong. Konata however remained the strongest as she rubbed her head and fought back her own tears she wanted to drop over her departed friend.

"After I found her body, I ducked into a bathroom and I couldn't stop throwing up." Wakase cried. "I was too scared to move until I heard more shots nearby that made me run again and I ended up here."

Miyuki placed her hands on Wakase's shoulders and gently massaged them. "It's okay. Like Tsukasa-san said…you're safe and with friends now and we'll never let you suffer anymore."

Hearing the sweet and tender serenade that was Miyuki's voice, Wakase formed more tears in her eyes and she quickly turned and hugged the pink-haired girl tightly while sobbing. Miyuki hugged her tightly again while Kagami continued to whisper to her sister to stop her crying over the late Patricia Martin. Konata however continued to stare at the weeping Izumi Wakase with tightened eyes.

Something was still bothering the blue-haired girl as she stared at the first year student in Miyuki's cuddle. She didn't want to admit it because like Hiyori Tamura, she hoped she was wrong in her belief that Izumi Wakase wasn't as innocent as she claimed and acted to be. It was no secret that Konata and Hiyori were close to each other because of their otaku lifestyles, but it was an unknown concept that they both shared a history with The Hunt Club with each other as well as Izumi Wakase. As a result, Hiyori was keeping a closer eye on Wakase and was even acting strange recently before this shooting and Konata had a feeling it had something to do with the upper-class first year student. She still had no proof and couldn't call Izumi Wakase out on being the school shooter because of a feeling so she decided to hold back

and wait for awhile longer to see where these recent developments would go.

As Kagami continued to soothe her crying sister, she began to reminisce for her, which always calmed her down. "Hey now, there's no need to be so upset. I promise you you're going to make it out of here. Hey…remember that time dad was honored at that groundbreaking ceremony for his dedication to the community?"

Tsukasa hiccupped again and nodded.

"And remember that time when Inori won all those scholarships that paid for her school? The local newspaper ran a story about her and she was even in the evening news." Kagami added.

Once again, Tsukasa nodded, beginning to make her feel better as she heard more about her family.

"Well you can't give up now, Tsukasa. You haven't even had the chance to show our family your true potential and talents yet." Kagami whispered with a smile. "Our family is filled with so many amazing people, some could even be considered heroes further back in our history. From leaders, to war heroes, to community icons, to budding academic scholars, and even to the unsung heroes who hold families together like mom. Now all we have to do is wait for you to shine and make us all proud. You know what? You hail from the damn Hiiragi's, Tsukasa. Is there anything better in the world?"

The final statements made Tsukasa smile deeply and she wiped away her tears. Her big sister once again was able to come to her rescue and brighten her terrible day by revealing the true beauty within her and her strength to keep fighting was alive once again.

Wakase slowly pulled away from Miyuki's hug and said, "So… what are we going to do?"

"We were thinking of making a break for the exit near the

gymnasium." Kagami informed as she too let go of Tsukasa and faced Wakase. "The last time we heard any gunshots was a few minutes ago coming from the nurse's office but we haven't heard anything since. I think the gunman went the other direction so we should be safe if we leave now."

"But what about Hiyorin?" Wakase asked.

Kagami glanced at the unconscious girl and back to Wakase. "We're just going to have to carry her. She wasn't shot at all and the worst thing she has is a concussion. It'll be tough but I still think we can all make it out together."

"I think we should stay here." Wakase quickly replied. "I heard that the Special Assault Team is coming soon and they'll be storming the entire school ready to shoot anything that moves so I think we should continue to ride it out and wait for all of this to be over. It's not worth the risk."

"You…you mean help hasn't arrived yet?" Tsukasa whimpered.

"The regular police have been out there since this started but none of them have made a move." Wakase replied.

Miyuki nodded. "That does make sense from their perspective. We heard some very powerful weaponry out there and I don't think they would want to risk their own officers."

"So they decided to leave us alone in here with that psychotic piece of wacko out there?!" Kagami snarled in frustration. "What a crock of shit. When we get out of here, I'm going to personally make sure heads will roll for this fucked up situation."

Tsukasa tried to calm her flustered sister while Konata turned back to Wakase. "I think that we can still make a break for it with you here, Wakase. You can help us carry Hiyorin and with you on our side, we'll definitely make it out."

Konata's verbal test for Wakase was met with disturbing results. The blue-haired girl saw the burgundy pools in her eyes begin to

transform into whirlpools of pure hate and anger. Her eyebrows slid closer together, nearly forming a glare and Konata could feel and even hear her own heart start to palpitate in her chest over the commotion. Her reflexes triggered her to gulp and she believed that now she and her closest friends were in the same room with the Ryoo High School shooter.

As quick as her angry face formed, she quickly wiped it away and smiled. "Sure…I'll help you guys carry Hiyorin out and if we work together, we'll definitely make it out like you said…Kona-chan."

Hearing Wakase identify her by her nickname sent a frightening chill down Konata's spine and she trembled as Wakase turned. When Wakase turned, the sudden movement made her uniform top swerve and Konata saw her entire life flash before her eyes when she saw a sudden for certain glimpse of the black handle of the pistol tucked into the waistband of her skirt. Her uniform top quickly covered the deadly weapon again without anyone else seeing it as Wakase walked over to Hiyori and bent down to her and began whispering, which Konata was now convinced were threats she was uttering.

Konata turned her head and saw Kagami, Tsukasa, and Miyuki still debating on what to do in terms of their escape and still completely oblivious to the danger. The blue-haired girl suddenly got an idea but it was going to be dangerous. If she could snatch the gun away from Wakase before she could react, Konata would have the upper hand and be able to bring a peaceful end to this mess.

Slowly and carefully, the blue-haired girl began to tiptoe towards Wakase's turned back while her other friends continued to converse. Feeling her heart pounding relentlessly and the sweat seeping through her skin, Konata monitored every step she took for fear of them becoming too loud. With every inch she crept closer to Wakase, the blue-haired girl's fear of being discovered increased. She tried to focus on keeping her breathing under control, though her racing adrenaline made that more difficult with another step closer to Wakase.

Feeling her bones creak as she lifted her arm, Konata made her final approach to Wakase's uniform top where she planned to lift

it at the back with one hand and take the gun away from her with the other. Izumi Wakase still seemed ignorant of Konata's intentions as she kept her back facing the blue-haired girl while still whispering to the sleeping Hiyori Tamura. Konata's fingertips touched the bottom of Wakase's uniform top.

As quick as lightening, Wakase spun around and latched onto Konata's hand and quickly pulled them both to their feet. With her free hand, Wakase reached behind her, pulled the gun out, and lifted it up and jammed it under Konata's chin. The sudden and harsh movements caught the attention of Kagami, Tsukasa, and Miyuki and when they finally saw what had happened, there wasn't anything they could do. They saw Izumi Wakase holding Konata's arm with one hand and the burgundy-eyed student held a black automatic pistol with her under hand, pointing it upward with the barrel under Konata's chin.

"Not…so…fast…Kona-chan…" Wakase whispered with a sinister grin and the look of an animal in her eyes, their faces only inches apart.

Tsukasa screamed her lungs empty when she saw the weapon while Kagami's natural instincts kicked in and she used her body as a shield for Tsukasa. Miyuki also released a quick scream of terror upon seeing that her blue-haired friend was only one trigger pull away from leaving them forever. The three girls inadvertently gathered closer together as Tsukasa continued to cry and scream while Kagami and Miyuki were still trying to register and comprehend the visual in their minds.

"Why…? Why are you doing this, Izumi Wakase?" Konata asked with pure fear in her voice while feeling the cold steel of the pistol barrel digging into the flesh attached to her chin.

Still keeping her animalistic grin and a tight grip on her weapon, she replied, "I think you know exactly why I'm doing this. But if you want to know more, allow me to add more insight with a poem. Insanity lurks within me, when will I see some clarity? In my world of darkness and pain which has driven me insane, I will take my gun and mark my aim. I'll shoot you in the head; you'll lay on the ground dead…with the rest of the blood today I have shed."

Wakase moved her thumb to the pistol's hammer and cocked it back, making the metal mechanisms echo in the room.

"Wakase don't do it!" Kagami cried. "Don't kill Konata! She's your friend! We're your friends!"

"Oh dear God, Wakase-san…what have you done?" Miyuki asked with terror in her voice.

"Why…why are you doing this…?" Tsukasa whimpered through her tears while looking over her sister's shoulder.

"Shut up!" Wakase screamed, making the youngest Hiiragi twin duck again.

"You're my friend. You're still my friend, Wakase." Konata whispered with the gun still jammed under her chin. "You're a lover of anime and manga just like me and you're also class president of my cousin's class, as well as a lover of all things that are cute. Holding five hostages in a classroom isn't you, Izumi Wakase."

"I said shut up!" Wakase screamed again. "You tried to take my gun, Konata! Give me one good goddamn reason why I shouldn't ice you right now!"

Gulping again, Konata took a deep breath and said, "Because I still see you as a friend like I said and despite all that you have done so far, I'm still going to do my best to save your life."

"You…you're the shooter…?!" Tsukasa wailed again. "You're the one who killed Patty-chan?!"

"And your teacher, Kuroi. And Kagami's teacher, Sakuraba." Wakase replied with gritting teeth. "Not to mention Misao Kusakabe is also now feeding the maggots."

Kagami's eyes shot open and she began to shake. "You're…you're

lying! You're lying!"

Wakase abruptly released Konata's hand while tightening her grip on her pistol and deepening it into Konata's chin to keep her from struggling. She reached into her skirt pocket and began fishing for the proof that Kagami needed to know her friend was gone. Wakase finally pulled out a plastic card and slid it on the floor towards Kagami. It was Misao's student ID card.

Seeing the card made Kagami's knees tremble and she collapsed to the floor and cried loudly. Her sister joined her in her emotional outburst as they both cried while Tsukasa gripped Kagami's uniform top tightly. As Miyuki's eyes also flooded out of empathy for Kagami, the twin-tailed girl suddenly shot to her feet, knocking her sister over and she too presented a face of an animal out for blood.

"Die you monster…!" Kagami screamed and took a step towards Wakase.

"One more step Kagami and you'll lose another friend when I pull this trigger!" Wakase warned, making Kagami halt her approach while she continued to breathe deeply and shake uncontrollably.

A deadly standoff suddenly showed itself to the classroom. Wakase still had Konata frozen in place with the gun lodged under her chin and all Kagami, Tsukasa, and Miyuki could do was watch helplessly. The four friends who had always been together since the start of high school had sinking feelings that more blood was going to be shed before this nightmare was over. Miyuki mustered all her inner strength and took a step forward.

"Okay, Wakase-san. You are clearly in control of our situations so I'll ask…what do you want from us?" She asked with dread.

Wakase shifted her burgundy eyes to Miyuki, startling the pink-haired girl. "You want to know what I want? I want this world to burn."

The salmon-haired girl that was Yutaka Kobayakawa continued

to move through the school towards the gymnasium on her righteous quest to collect her best friend, Minami Iwasaki. Upon overhearing everything that was said over her sister's police radio, Yutaka's newfound strength kept driving her forward through the butchered school. She did her best to keep her mind on finding the green-haired girl, though the carnage she had to dash through proved it difficult. She ran through empty hallways stained with blood on the walls also plastered with bullet holes and she almost lost her balance several times when her shoes would slide on the spent casings. The sight of dead bodies covered in blood also made her trek difficult but she didn't give up.

Despite the fact that her spirit wasn't faltering, her weak physical health was beginning to collapse and her vision began to go blurry as she continued to pant and sweat. Though she tried to push through it, the salmon-haired girl's body began to slow until she had to stop as her lungs continued to squeeze inside her chest. She clutched her chest in pain and felt her face was beginning to burn and she eyed a girl's bathroom.

Feeling the need to cool her face, Yutaka quickly dashed inside and navigated towards the sinks, though a sickening sight caught her eye. In one of the open stalls, a very large puddle of drying blood complemented with blood-stained paper towels was covering the floor inside it. Little did Yutaka know, she was standing in the same bathroom where Misao was caring for Ayano until Patty also came in and assisted. Yutaka shuddered at the sight with a sigh of disgust and turned away from the large red spot and turned on the faucet.

She collected as much cold water as she could in her cupped hands and splashed it across her face. The waves of coolness began to surge across her face and she began to feel better while she continued to breathe deeply. Yutaka repeated the process several times until her heated temperature began to drop and she felt much better. Feeling refreshed, she took one final deep breath and readied herself to continue searching for Minami.

Yutaka reached for a paper towel and when she took it and dried her face, she turned to throw the crumbled paper towel to the open garbage can until something new and strange caught her

eyes. Sitting in the corner of the bathroom was a crumbled and wrinkled ensemble of black tactical clothes. The salmon-haired girl squinted and her heart skipped a beat when she realized the clothes to belong to the Ryoo High School shooter. She recognized them from when the shooter cornered her and Hiyori only about an hour ago. The black combat boots were also sitting with the clothes and it became clear that the killer had changed her wardrobe.

Yutaka however knew who she was and what she looked like so she abruptly left the bathroom and resumed her quest. As she continued to walk down the hallway, the whole school began to shake. The sudden whooshes of a few helicopters passed slowly overhead and Yutaka could hear the sounds of massive vehicles approaching the school. Her curiosity rising, she slowly walked to another window that gave her a clear view of the activity outside and the scenes became more real when she saw black armored vehicles begin to unload countless men dressed the way Izumi Wakase was in black tactical gear and armed with automatic rifles.

The Special Assault Team had arrived.

She watched them take up perimeters around the school while other fire squads began to meet with their team leaders to discuss their plans for storming the school. Black Hawk helicopters also belonging to the SAT circled overhead and Yutaka could see snipers with powerful rifles leaning out the open hatches looking for the shooter and more sharpshooters began taking positions on the rooftops of surrounding buildings.

The sickly and shaken student gulped upon seeing more firearms pointing in her direction and she quickly turned away. She shook it off and kept convincing herself that they were friendly and they were there to help her and the other students. Regardless, she wasn't going to wait for them to save Minami so Yutaka kept moving down the senior hallway towards the gymnasium.

Yutaka turned down another hallway and saw two more dead bodies near a familiar classroom door. It was her cousin's classroom and she listened closely but was unable to hear any sounds resembling human activity, making her believe that she

was able to flee to safety. She kept telling herself that Konata was a strong and resilient girl that knew how to work her way out of any kind of problem. It was this self-talk that enabled Yutaka to keep walking forward as she neared the recreational area of the school where the locker rooms where and hopefully where her friend was as well.

As Yutaka approached Nanako Kuroi's classroom, the door suddenly slid open, freezing Yutaka in her tracks and nearly making her jump at the sudden movement. A thought struck her mind which she vocalized as, "Konata? Konata is that you in there?"

The salmon-haired girl approached the door and rounded the open doorframe but didn't expect to see the scene in front of her, though she was incredibly relieved and happy when she did. She saw her cousin Konata along with Kagami, Tsukasa, Miyuki, and even the sleeping Hiyori nestled together in a trembling group at the far side of the room under the windows.

"Konata!" Yutaka exclaimed happily and began to dash into the classroom.

"Yu-chan, run!" Konata cried out.

When Yutaka entered the classroom, a hand attached to a human body standing next to her against the wall grabbed her by her hair and pulled with all their might. It sent shockwaves of pain into Yutaka as she screamed and the hand continued to guide her into the classroom until it released her with a mighty throw towards the rest of the girls.

Yutaka landed on the classroom floor and quickly looked up. She suddenly realized she had walked into a trap when she saw Izumi Wakase standing above her with the pistol pointing at her face, sending her into a panic attack as she cried and screamed in fear. Wakase took a step back and allowed Konata to pull Yutaka into the group of frightened girls as the armed student walked back to the door and closed it.

CHAPTER 11

"You just couldn't let it go! You just had to come back, didn't you?!" Izumi Wakase screamed loudly as she pointed her gun at Konata who was sheltering the crying Yutaka Kobayakawa. "I gave you a way out and now you're going to die because you were too fucking stupid to take it and be grateful for it!"

Hearing the angry voice thunder in the room intensified the salmon-haired girl's crying as her older cousin continued to use her body as a shield and Tsukasa also hugged Yutaka, also crying. The group of girls continued to huddle tightly together in a pack under the classroom windows as Wakase continued to breathe deeply with anger while waving the gun in their faces.

"Look it doesn't have to be like this, Wakase." Konata sternly said with bravery while making sure Yutaka stayed behind her. "Yu-chan just came back because she's worried about her friend, that's all. She didn't come back just to spite you or to be a hero. All she wants is Minami, that's all."

Wakase rolled her eyes. "That pathetic bitch is dead. I saw the wound on her side when I shot her. She was practically holding her guts in with her bare hands."

Yutaka cringed and felt her stomach flip when she heard the graphic description of Minami's wound. The image still burned in her memory of watching her green-haired friend struggle to hold her wound while she rested on the classroom floor as it spilled blood and all Yutaka could do was cry for her. Yutaka still felt bad that she let Hiyori simply scoop her up and abandon her like that but she knew why she did it. She heard Minami's request to

Hiyori to evacuate Yutaka but the salmon-haired girl still needed to know her best friend was going to be safe.

"Don't talk like that, Wakase!" Konata snapped despite the danger being pointed at her face. "You have no idea how much Minami means to Yu-chan! When she first started going to Ryoo, you should've seen how scared she was but Minami was there for her. Yu-chan was a lot like you when all you wanted was a peaceful life where everyone accepted you."

Hearing this made Wakase grit her teeth and glare at Konata but silence was her only response, allowing Konata to keep talking.

"Okay so let's go over this again. You're the Ryoo High School shooter and you have all of us trapped in this classroom. What's the big plan, Wakase? Are you just going to mow us all down without a second thought or consideration?" Konata continued to stand tall against Wakase.

To everyone's sudden surprise and even horror, Wakase stopped pacing and turned to the huddled group with an evil grin and a look in her eyes that showed nothing but evil intentions. She raised the gun at the group again, making Yutaka and Tsukasa hold each other tighter while deepening their cries and it prompted Konata, Kagami, and Miyuki to scoot closer together, expecting more blood to fly. Wakase started giggling an evil cackle that sent chills into her potential victims' bodies and she continued to eye the group.

"Oh no, Kona-chan. I won't mow you all down. Just one of you." Wakase whispered evilly. "I'm going to kill…Tsukasa Hiiragi."

Hearing her name triggered the youngest Hiiragi twin to scream loudly and Kagami instinctively moved her body in front of her sister while retorting, "The hell you will! You're not going to hurt my sister and if you try you're gonna have to go through me!"

"Keep it up, Kagami, and you just might get your wish!" Wakase yelled back, still pointing the gun at the Hiiragi twins. "This is the price you're going to pay! You're going to lose your sister because of the problems you had created for me in the past!"

Kagami squinted her eyes. "What the hell are you talking about?! What did we ever do to you?!"

"It isn't what you two have done…it's what you did personally, Kagami Hiiragi!" Wakase screamed and one of her eyes suddenly dropped a tear, though no one saw it in the midst of the gun-toting horror.

Kagami tried searching her memory bank and tried to make it quick with Wakase still pointing the gun in their direction. As hard as she tried, every memory involving the burgundy-eyed student was vague and didn't contain any significantly distinct memories or bad times that would make Wakase snap. For the life of her, the twin-tailed girl couldn't realize why Izumi Wakase was so mad at her for what she had supposedly done that it would drive her to want to kill her little sister.

"I…I don't know what you're talking about!" Kagami finally vocalized after giving up her relentless trip into her memory to dig up any old memories. "You and I hardly ever spoke to each other before and we've never hung out together until now! Whatever's pissing you off like this leave my sister out of it!"

"You mean…you really don't remember?" Wakase asked, still pointing the gun at the twins.

"Remember what?!" Kagami cried.

Wakase's angry glare lifted and she slowly moved her thumb to the hammer of the pistol while gently pulling the trigger. She gently released the hammer and placed it back into place without it firing and she lowered the pistol. Still staring at Kagami with a look so sinister, Wakase cleared her throat and opened her heart of mutated darkness to give the twin-tailed girl some much needed clarity.

"Fine. Then I'll tell you a little story and maybe it'll all come back. First thing you should know about me is that my parents were two of the most overbearing, grueling individuals you would ever meet. Everything had to be perfect…especially me. I

was the chosen one to be the heir of their financial business because my older brother had fallen into the wrong crowd and developed a drug habit. My parents quarantined him from society to keep their name clean and simply swept him under the rug as if he was nothing." Wakase began telling her story, though no one noticed how much emphasis she put on "were" when referring to her parents. "As Kona-chan and Hiyorin would be able to tell you, my strongest subject in school was home economics but do you think that those kinds of skills were appreciated by two white-collar parents who ran an international finance company and sat in meetings with some of the world's most powerful leaders and influential businessmen?"

Konata, Kagami, Tsukasa, Miyuki, and Yutaka all exchanged looks with each other but didn't vocalize an answer, though Wakase saw they understood her point so she continued.

"Kagami…you were a first year here at Ryoo High School with your sister at the time. My father had just opened a new financial headquarters building in Tokyo and guess who the religious leader was who led the groundbreaking ceremony for it." Wakase snarled and her hostility began to return.

"Da…dad…" Kagami whispered with enlarged eyes.

Wakase nodded. "I remember my father having a very long conversation with your father after the ceremony. He thanked him for coming out and performing it…then he started to talk about me. He said that he wished that I could only be a third of what you are academically…then maybe he wouldn't be so pessimistic about my future. Your father didn't waste the chance to brag about you and all of your accomplishments. All of these clubs you were a part of when you were little, all the A's you would bring home, how many random people would just walk up to him on the streets and pay him compliments of how good of a job he did raising you, everything."

Kagami could see Wakase's anger was rising as her eyes and gritting teeth illustrated as she continued.

"After that, my parents never stopped with their prying into my

school life. They wanted me to be just like you. The pride, joy, and academic splendor that was you…Kagami Hiiragi." Wakase spat with her breathing deepening and the hand holding her gun beginning to tremble. "The relentless tutoring, the ongoing scrutinizing about my home economics desires. I wanted to be a chef with my life! I didn't want to sit in some damn office building all day shaking hands with people I don't even know! I just wanted to cook! My mother would snub me and call me a pathetic child whenever my eyes would light up every time I would see a new stuffed animal in a toy store window. My father would scold me relentlessly if I ever got anything less than an A in subjects like math and economics and he would never stop telling me things like, 'why can't you be more like Kagami? Kagami is perfect so why aren't you? I bet Kagami could do it so what's your excuse? Why couldn't Kagami be my daughter?' It continued like this every single day…but it stopped soon enough…when I entered high school and I started to secretly enjoy anime and manga. But then I soon realized I just swapped one hell for another when I became the favorite target of a charming little group called The Hunt Club."

The huddled girls gulped when they saw Izumi Wakase begin foaming at the mouth with her eyes showing nothing but bloodlust and insanity within them.

"I'll tell you something else, too. One rainy and wet day on my walk home from school, I was approached by five seniors, one of them was Misao Kusakabe. When they saw it was me, they started following me while laughing and making fun of me for my interests in cute things. When I approached a street corner, Kusakabe stepped forward and pushed me, making me fall into a large puddle in the street and they kept laughing. I even felt a few of them spit on me as I was curled on that cold, wet street." Wakase said, her face flushed red and her eyes swelling. "To this day, I still can't get their laughs out of my head. I thought that listening to their blood-curling screams before I killed them would satisfy me…but it hasn't so far. When I got home soaking wet and crying while covered in scrapes and bruises, my father took one look at me and said, 'Kagami wouldn't be crying now.' I saw the look in his eye when he said that. He was convinced I was the world's biggest loser."

Kagami felt her eyes tremble in sympathy for the distraught

student as she still kept a tight hug around her sister. She didn't know what to do. The twin-tailed girl clearly could see the broken Izumi Wakase had lost her sanity and no order of words in the world would be able to repair her, especially if they came from Kagami. They would be baseless and it would only further Wakase's anger if the person she hated the most would be the one who would try and get to her level and reason with her. Still, she had to say something.

"I'm…I'm sorry all of that had to happen to you, Wakase-san. No one deserved that kind of treatment but I still cannot make the connection as to why you want to hurt my sister." Kagami finally spoke while still hugging Tsukasa as she wept.

Wakase narrowed her eyes again. "You still don't get it, do you Kagami? According to my parents and the general consensus on the streets…you're perfect and you can do anything right. Well I'm going to show the entire world right now that you're not. I'm going to kill your sister and let you live with the guilt of not being able to protect her forever. You think you're perfect Kagami? We'll see how perfect you think you are when you're lowering your sister into a six foot hole in the cold, dark ground because you weren't there for her…even though she was in the same room with you and the last thing she cried was your name before her voice was silenced forever."

Kagami held her sister to her chest and entered a glaring contest with Wakase. The twin-tailed girl was determined to protect Tsukasa with her life, though anyone could imagine her surprise when the crying Tsukasa lifted her leaking face and began to pull away from the protective embrace of her sister. Tsukasa moved herself towards the open where Wakase would have a clear shot at her but Wakase could see the youngest Hiiragi twin had something she wanted to say.

Tsukasa sniffed a few more times, wiped her eyes, and looked up. Through her own broken and distraught emotions, Tsukasa spoke to Wakase in a crying voice while looking at her in her eyes and not the gun. "What's wrong with you, Wakase-san? You're just a kid. We are all just kids here. How can you have so much hate in your heart? What has happened to all of us? What has happened to mankind…if this is how you truly feel? That killing me just to

make my sis cry for the rest of your life would bring you justice. We're just kids…we shouldn't be forced to do this to each other…! These are the years we should be enjoying the most with our friends! Why…?! Why are you making it so hard…?! No one deserved what they got today…! Not Minami-chan, not Patty-chan, not Kusakabe-san, nobody! I just want to go home with sis! I want to hug my mommy and daddy and other sisters and tell them how much I love them! This isn't right…! This isn't right…!"

Tsukasa finished her tear-soaked outburst and felt herself fall to the tile floor and continued to cry loudly. Kagami of course was there and she quickly scooted over to her and held her once again. The Hiiragi twins continued to hold each other in their horrifying situation as Izumi Wakase simply stood above them and stared with no humanity left in her eyes or on her face. Tsukasa's weeping was the only audible sound as the other girls watched both the Hiiragi twins and the student who was holding them hostage.

After a few seconds passed, Wakase turned her head and began to walk closer to Konata, Yutaka, and Miyuki as they continued to huddle in fear. Wakase cleared her throat and said, "Tsukasa… you are the one who I will kill today…or I'll start executing your friends until it's just you left…starting with Konata's precious cousin."

This time it was Yutaka's turn to start screaming as Wakase slowly raised her pistol and cocked the hammer and moved her finger towards the trigger. Konata naturally put herself in the path of the bullet when it would fly but the blue-haired girl knew this wouldn't stop Wakase from shooting. The group of girls began to panic when they saw how serious Wakase was and that Tsukasa's heartfelt speech didn't even make a dent in the psychotic shell that was the crazed student. She was hopelessly lost.

Tsukasa and Kagami quickly scurried back to the group and hugged each other tightly while keeping Yutaka behind all of them. Seeing the cyclones of hate in Izumi Wakase's eyes confirmed it for all of them that they were about to die and they closed their eyes, waiting for the shower of hot lead to fall upon them.

As Wakase began to pull the trigger with Konata in her sights, the unexpected happened. A new pair of hands suddenly came from behind Wakase and grabbed her arm holding the pistol while the other latched onto her hair. The psychotic student with the gun screamed as the hands pulled her back, making her fire a shot into the ceiling and the huddled girls screamed as well and opened their eyes.

Yutaka screamed the loudest when she saw Minami Iwasaki wrestling with Izumi Wakase for control of the firearm. Minami snuck into the room through the unlocked door while Wakase was getting ready to kill them. The green-haired girl's gunshot wound was wrapped with two uniform tops around her own blood-stained one just as the police officer said and Minami was clearly exhausted and weak from the blood loss but the stakes were different now. Yutaka was in danger, making the seemingly passive Minami Iwasaki turn into a wildcat as she pulled Wakase to the ground and they continued to wrestle. Wakase fired another shot, narrowly missing Minami and striking a wall.

As the group of girls watched in horror, Hiyori Tamura finally awoke from her concussion and was still delirious from the blow. She slowly sat up and shook her head and suddenly became engulfed in the panic storm that now hovered over their classroom. It felt like a bad dream as she slowly pulled herself to her feet and saw Minami was in danger of being killed as Wakase rolled herself on top of the green-haired girl and was trying to push the pistol towards the bottom of Minami's jaw while she pushed back.

Everyone was so focused on the battle between Minami and Wakase they didn't see Hiyori approach Wakase, still delirious and unable to grasp the danger she was in. It was Yutaka that spotted her first.

"Tamura-san, no!" She cried.

The salmon-haired girl's cry caught the attention of Izumi Wakase and she turned her head to see Hiyori approaching them and the deranged student quickly acted. She punched Minami in the stomach, knocking the wind out of her and allowing her to pull

away from the green-haired girl's grip and stand up. Wakase spun the pistol towards Hiyori and pulled the trigger.

Another deafening blast erupted from the gun and a flying bullet struck Hiyori in the stomach, sweeping her off her feet. She landed on the floor with a crash as Wakase still remained standing over Minami as she breathed deeply and seeing Hiyori remaining on the floor as she bled sent the crowd into another screaming frenzy. The long-haired meganekko was still alive as she held her wound but it didn't quell the screaming by the others as Wakase turned her attention back to Yutaka who was in the open and screaming. Wakase grinned again and moved her finger to the trigger.

Minami looked around and saw a pen resting nearby dropped by another student in the panic when the shooting first started. She quickly grabbed it and with all her might her muscles would allow her, Minami drove the pointed object into Wakase's left quad, sending waves of excruciating pain into her. Wakase screamed loudly with all her might and turned her attention back to Minami, who was rocking the pen back and forth in Wakase's leg to intensify the pain. Minami looked up one last time and stared down the smoking barrel of the gun. The last thing she heard was Yutaka's voice scream her name.

Izumi Wakase pulled the trigger again and Yutaka Kobayakawa watched from beginning to end the bullet leave the gun, enter Minami's forehead, and exit the back. The violent attack made the green-haired girl's body go limp and she fell back into a large puddle of her own blood. Motionless and lifeless she remained as Wakase fell to the ground again and held her leg with the pen still jammed in it.

Yutaka screamed and cried loudly with such emotional devastation that it was enough to also send Konata into a crying spree, especially when she saw Yutaka make a lunge for Minami but the blue-haired girl was there to hold her back. The only thing one could hear in the late Ms. Kuroi's classroom was the giant avalanche of screams from every girl in there. Minami Iwasaki was dead and Hiyori Tamura was severely wounded and bleeding profusely.

"I…I…I can't feel my legs…oh God…I can't feel my legs." Hiyori whispered as she held her bleeding wound.

Miyuki scurried over to the wounded girl as Wakase tended her own wound. She quickly pulled the pen out of her leg, sending more pain into it as she breathed hard with more anger. She tossed the blood-soaked pen aside and struggled to pull herself to her feet again but when she did, she raised the gun again and this time she showed even more desire to kill.

Kagami quickly stood up and in front of the screaming Tsukasa. "Haven't we seen enough killing today?! What did Minami ever do to you except try and protect her friend?! What did Hiyori ever do to you but try and be your friend?! When are you going to stop this, Izumi Wakase?! All of this bloodshed and for what?! Because your parents were assholes?! Because you were bullied?! Well you've killed your friends, shot up a school, and murdered countless others so I have to ask was it worth it?! Was it worth it?!"

Izumi Wakase held her leg and grinned again when she glanced at the clock in the classroom. "It'll all be worth it to know that now you're all going to die and I won't even have to fire another shot! There's a bomb in the school and it'll go off in…five minutes."

Hearing this confession once again sent the crowd into a panic but Kagami tried to remain calm when she cried, "Liar!"

"You'll see in five minutes! Look at it this way, Kagami. We had an early spring with lots of warm weather but this school's heating system doesn't understand that because it's all on a seasonal calendar so the source of energy used to heat this school is still running through every pipe in the buildings. Tell me Kagami, what element heats this entire school?" Wakase demanded as she held her bleeding leg.

Kagami thought about it but soon reached a heart-stopping conclusion. "Natural gas." She vocalized.

"Extremely flammable too." Wakase laughed. "The explosion will

turn everyone here to ashes and level half of the school, as well as anyone left in it!"

Kagami could now see Wakase wasn't lying and the clock for all of them was about to strike midnight. Wakase would die with them in the blast but it was clear she didn't care. They were now officially on a race against time and Kagami had no choice but to make an all or nothing move. She had to protect Tsukasa at all costs and the rest of her friends. Hiyori was wounded but still alive so she also had to be carried out. As Kagami looked around for a way to get out of this situation, she realized that she was able to gain some ground on Wakase when she stood and yelled at her and it seemed Wakase didn't notice. If she charged there was a good chance she could tackle her and wrestle the weapon away from her but there was also a good chance she would be shot and killed in the process.

Opportunity suddenly became real for Kagami when a deafening whoosh sounded overhead. A Special Assault Team helicopter was hovering overhead and everyone could begin to hear the sounds of boots landing on the roof. Izumi Wakase's sinister grin quickly disappeared when she heard the announcement of more company coming and it was then that she realized her plan to keep her hostages may be in jeapordy. The only thing she had working in her favor was that the possibility of SAT officers finding and evacuating them before the bomb went off was very low.

"You hear that? The Special Assault Team is here and you're going to be outmanned and outgunned." Kagami said calmly despite watching Hiyori struggle with her bleeding wound and also glancing at Minami's dead body. With Wakase's attention on the ceiling, Kagami began to step forward. "It's still not too late to surrender. You'll get a fair trial just like anyone else would and if you let us go now, I promise you I'll be there to testify to that. Something your parents wouldn't have done for you."

With her focus still on the ceiling, Wakase replied, "You're not going anywhere, Kagami. Even if it means they find my bomb and disarm it, I'm still taking your sister down with me."

Kagami decided she was close enough and took one final breath.

"Not today."

The twin-tailed girl lunged for the weapon and grabbed the wrist that was holding it, kick-starting another struggle. The two girls wrestled with each other on their feet as the screaming once again intensified and the gun fired again upward into the ceiling. Wakase struggled with Kagami's muscular power but was able to lower it towards her and it faced her abdomen before Wakase was able to pull the trigger again and fired another shot. The shot echoed in the room but Kagami still fought long and hard until the tide of the horrific day turned in her favor. Wakase's sweating palm lost grip of the weapon and Kagami snagged it from her grip and was able to push the disgruntled student to the floor.

Kagami Hiiragi held the pistol in her hands with a look of anger and her adrenaline was racing as she looked down at Izumi Wakase. Wakase still held her look of hatred despite the fact that Kagami was now in possession of her last weapon and the game seemed to be up for her.

"We're leaving this place now!" Kagami exclaimed as she pointed the gun at Izumi Wakase.

As Kagami appeared triumphant, Konata looked around the room. She still couldn't find where the last bullet hit before Kagami wrestled the gun out of Wakase's grip.

Outside however, an SAT sniper team finally got into position and had a clear view into Kuroi's classroom, though they had missed seeing the struggle with Kagami and Wakase. A shooter with a sniper rifle held it to his shoulders and stared down the scope with the crosshairs on Kagami Hiiragi's head. A spotter with an optical sight also stared into the window and saw Kagami holding the gun and pointing it at Wakase.

"This is Raven Team, we have a visual on a female student armed with a pistol and holding several other students hostage. Requesting permission to engage, over." The spotter said over his radio as he stared at Kagami shouting at Wakase.

"Do you have a visual on the student and the weapon, over?" The commanding officer replied back.

"Affirmative, commander. The student is female and we have a visual on the weapon, over." The spotter replied.

"Roger that Raven Team you are granted permission to take the hostile out, over." The commanding officer ordered.

The spotter patted his shooting partner on the back twice, telling him he was clear to engage the target. He had his crosshairs on Kagami Hiiragi, the girl they thought was the shooter of Ryoo High School because of her hostile movements towards Izumi Wakase and she was in possession of the weapon. He turned his safety off and moved his finger towards the trigger, still having the side of the twin-tailed girl's head in the middle of his scope's crosshairs.

He began to squeeze the trigger.

CHAPTER 12

"We're leaving this place now!" Kagami exclaimed as she pointed the gun at Izumi Wakase.

The crazed student however remained defiant in the twin-tailed girl's demand as she grasped a textbook her hand was resting on as she stayed on the floor. Quickly, Wakase gripped the book and threw it at Kagami's head. Because the twin-tailed girl wasn't trained or experienced with firearms or combat, her natural instincts took hold and she twisted her head and allowed the book to miss her head. It wasn't a moment too soon.

A bullet from a sniper rifle burst through the window on a collision course with Kagami's head and the metal projectile struck her. The bullet skimmed past Kagami's ducking head and got lost in the sea of her majestic hair. It collided with her right ribbon holding her right pigtail together and tore it clean off her head and the bullet kept going until it struck the classroom wall. A wave of Kagami's hair follicles sprayed everywhere and

everyone aside from Wakase screamed when they saw blood fly from Kagami's head and she fell to the ground and out of sight of the snipers.

Tsukasa screamed her sister's name more loudly than she ever had before in her life when she saw Kagami's head bleed and the youngest Hiiragi twin was convinced her sister was dead. To her sudden surprise and joyous relief, Kagami suddenly sat up again and held the gun at Izumi Wakase again, who was about to charge her in an attempt to get it back. Kagami gripped the right side of her head and looked at the blood-soaked appendage while breathing deeply. The bullet came so close to Kagami's head, it skinned by and cut the side of her noggin open.

"What…what the hell was that?!" Kagami cried as she looked around and saw her severed hair follicles littering the classroom floor.

"Special Assault Team snipers! They must've seen you with the gun!" Konata cried.

"So they decided to fucking shoot me?!" Kagami yelled back. "I guess you were right, Konata! You only get warning shots in games!"

"Kagami-san, the bomb!" Miyuki exclaimed. "We have to get out of here now!"

Kagami glanced back at Wakase, who still stayed on the ground and also out of the view of the snipers. She was in quite a predicament. Minami Iwasaki was dead, Hiyori Tamura was critically wounded, and Yutaka and Tsukasa were beyond panicked as they still cried. She also had the killer cornered but if they got up again there was no telling what would happen. Konata and Miyuki were the only ones that were still calm but barely despite all that had just happened within the past two minutes when Minami first wrestled Izumi Wakase. Konata could tend to Yutaka, Miyuki could carry Hiyori, and Kagami could handle Tsukasa but what would they do with Wakase?

"Konata, take your cousin. Miyuki, do your best to get Hiyori out

of here." Kagami began to relay her orders, making them look at her with uncertainty. "Tsukasa, stick by me. We're getting out of here right now."

"But what about Wakase-san?" Tsukasa squeaked.

Kagami narrowed her eyes with anger at Wakase, who once again returned the glare and restarting the leering contest between them. "She's coming with us, too."

The rest of the girls gasped in horror at the order. They wanted to object but knew the stakes were too high to start a debate on morality versus justice with the bomb close to detonation. Kagami was in possession of the weapon so she held Wakase at bay as Miyuki collected the still bleeding and crying Hiyori and carried her on her back while Konata escorted her devastated cousin past her best friend's body. They stayed low and below the windows to avoid being seen by the snipers and finally made it out of Kuroi's classroom and began running down the hallway. Tsukasa held onto her sister's shoulders with quivering hands. As Tsukasa was about to maneuver to Kagami's left side, which was facing the door, the twin-tailed girl suddenly shifted her body, forcing Tsukasa to stay on her right.

"Si…sis…" she whispered also with a quivering voice.

"Okay, let's go. Move it!" Kagami screamed at Wakase as she tightened her grip on the pistol and readied herself mentally and physically to pull the trigger if she had to.

Wakase continued to glare at the twin-tailed girl but realized the odds weren't in her favor anymore and she complied. She too stayed low to the ground and Kagami followed her with the gun still in hand as Tsukasa followed while gripping her sister's uniform. The three girls also made it out of their late teacher's classroom and were once again in the hallway littered with empty bullet casings, blood, and bodies. Kagami kept Wakase moving in front of her to ensure there wouldn't be any funny business from the deranged student.

As they moved at a hastened pace, Wakase cleared her throat and

suddenly said, "So…how's the gunshot wound, Kagami?"

Kagami tightened her glare. "It's fine. It just skinned my head and my hair was the only true casualty from it."

To the surprise of the Hiiragi twins, Wakase shook her head and giggled. "No, no, not that one. I'm talking about the one that I inflicted onto you."

Tsukasa's heart nearly exploded when she heard this and it prompted her to look at her sister. "What…what is she talking about, sis?!"

Kagami quickly shook her head. "Nothing, Tsukasa! Nothing! She's just trying to crawl inside your head so don't think about it!"

"Check her left side. She went to great lengths to hide it from you, Tsukasa." Wakase said with a complacent voice and still walking forward.

Tsukasa quickly released her sister's right uniform sleeve and tried to make it around her sister, who to her horror, was once again trying to block her, as if she was hiding something. The youngest Hiiragi twin remained undeterred until she ducked under Kagami's flailing arms and felt Kagami's left side.

Tsukasa's heart sank when she felt the left side of her sister was wet. It only made it worse when she retracted her hand and it was covered in red liquid. Tsukasa looked around her sister and she began to wail loudly when she saw a red stain on Kagami's left uniform side was growing bigger in the white cloth. Tsukasa replayed everything in her mind and remembered when Kagami was wrestling for the gun with Wakase, the deranged student was able to fire a few shots in every direction, and one of them was into Kagami's abdomen.

"Sis…! You were shot?!" Tsukasa cried loudly.

Kagami shook her head. "It's nothing, Tsukasa, I'm fine. Just

forget about it because we're almost out of here."

Despite the fact that her sister still seemed to be okay despite the gunshot wound to a seemingly critical area, Tsukasa still cried as Kagami continued to lead them out of the school as their time was nearly up. However, they didn't know how much danger they were in as they only had less than two minutes left until the bomb went off.

Konata led the charge out of the school and they thought they would be blasted by the beautiful and glorious smell of freedom. However, when they arrived outside, it looked as though they had turned around and limped back into Ryoo High School. More bodies stretched out on the schoolyard littered the ground and the once lushes green springtime grass was coated red as the sounds of crying and screaming continued, which was complemented by the chopping of helicopter blades above them. They looked skyward and saw another SAT Black Hawk helicopter landing more men on the school's roof while a red and white medical helicopter landed nearby, kicking up dirt and debris everywhere. Konata carried Yutaka with her arm over her shoulder and didn't expect to see a landscape out of Hell.

Onlookers and parents wounded in Izumi Wakase's window attack were still on the streets being tended to by the thinned out paramedics as the noise outside ripped Konata's, Yutaka's, Miyuki's, and Hiyori's eardrums apart. The combination of helicopters landing, human screams, and ambulance and police sirens echoing around the school was like being in the middle of a war. The four latest girls to reemerge from Ryoo High School were covered in sweat, blood, dirt, and their uniforms were scratched and torn in some parts. What made it worse for them was when they saw they were on their own as no more paramedics could even come over to them and escort them away from the school. Though they were barricaded in their classroom at the time, it was clear to them that Izumi Wakase launched an attack on the crowds of innocent and unarmed bystanders.

Konata turned her head and saw paramedics loading the last of four wounded students on stretchers into the red and white helicopter and recognized one of them. She saw the messy and blood-stained orange hair and crying face of Ayano Minegishi

being loaded into the helicopter. The friend of Kagami Hiiragi continued to scream a name in agony and Konata assumed it was Misao Kusakabe's name after hearing everything Izumi Wakase told them in Kuroi's classroom. The massive doors of the helicopter were slammed shut and the flying machine lifted off the ground and began its fifth trek back to Tokyo to find another hospital that could take the victims.

Still breathing deeply in futile attempts to calm herself, Yui Narumi continued to pace back and forth outside the bullet-riddled school. She was waiting for another officer to get back to her on locating her sister but she knew the SAT just entered Ryoo and it would take awhile to uncover all the bodies, though Yui tried to keep the idea of finding Yutaka's "body" out of her mind.

Despite the hoards of deafening and horrible noise created by the panic, Yui's ears perked up when she heard a voice over all of it scream, "Yui-nee-san!"

She quickly turned her head and Yui's eyes flooded when she saw her little cousin carrying her crying and screaming little sister by her arm over her shoulder through the crowd. The two frightened girls were covered in sweat, blood and dust from the terrifying ordeal and for them the horror seemed to be over at long last. Yui pushed her way through the crowd again and even plowed one of her fellow officers to the ground as she tore through the yellow police tape surrounding the school and continued running for Konata and Yutaka.

Yui scooped her petite sister away from Konata and when Yutaka realized it was Yui who was holding her up, the salmon-haired girl cried louder as she hugged her around her shoulders and wrapped her legs around her back and continued shedding tears. She cried her name and Minami's name over and over and Yui had a feeling she knew what had happened in there. Yui looked down at Konata, who was scanning the crowd for her own father but was coming up empty.

When Konata looked back up at Yui and saw her older cousin's eyes were beginning to deepen with water until they spilled, Konata mimicked the expression. She quickly covered her face as she sank to her knees.

Miyuki was lucky when she and Hiyori broke away from Konata and Yutaka. She was able to flag down a team of paramedics that was forced to leave a student on the schoolyard after they had to pronounce him dead. They took the crying girl off her back and carried her away and Miyuki's nerves had reached their breaking point. She hugged herself tightly and her knees trembled, taking away her ability to stand and she fell to the ground. Releasing her tears, Miyuki cried as she rested her hands on the ground and cried. Though she knew that Hiyori would survive, something was telling her that the wounded girl would wish she would've died. Miyuki knew what was going to happen to the wounded girl. Feeling her nerves continue to crumble, Miyuki screamed loudly as the SAT helicopter hovering above the school continued to unload students.

Kagami couldn't keep fooling herself as she kept walking with her sister in tow and the psychotic student in front of her as she felt her grip on the gun loosening. The wound Izumi Wakase inflicted onto Kagami was beginning to take its toll and the twin-tailed girl feared that it had the potential to be fatal. As she held the wound, the blood was still leaking out and she was beginning to feel lightheaded and began to drag her feet.

"You can feel the bullet in your stomach, can't you Kagami?" Wakase asked tauntingly with a smile as she continued to walk forward. "You know, before I unleashed my vengeance on this school, I did a bit of research on human anatomy. You're going to start to spit-up blood and from there, your time will be limited. What will be your last words to your sister? Are you upset that you won't get the chance to hug your mother or father before you die?"

"Shut up you monster!" Tsukasa yelled and suddenly saw Kagami nearly misstep and fall. "Sis, are you okay?!"

Kagami quickly pushed her back and nodded fiercely. "Yes, yes I'm fine."

However, Tsukasa knew Kagami was lying to her when she saw a little bit of red liquid begin to ooze out of Kagami's mouth and the twin-tailed girl finally had to stop. Kagami spat the blood out

as more came and she fell to her knees, making Tsukasa scream and collapse with her, not noticing that the gun slid away from Kagami's grasp and was sitting at Izumi Wakase's feet.

Still keeping her sinister smirk, Wakase slowly bent down and picked it up again while continuing to watch Tsukasa cry and scream Kagami's name. She watched the youngest Hiiragi twin hold Kagami's weakening body close as she continued to drip blood from her mouth. Kagami's breathing deepened until the twin-tailed girl slowly looked up at her crying sister. She smiled and weakly lifted her hand and gently rubbed it through Tsukasa's hair. Kagami smiled lightly as the life in her eyes began to fade away.

"Tsu…Tsukasa…my sister…" Kagami whispered through the blood. "I…I love you. Please…get out of here…go…go now…"

Kagami's eyelids slowly closed and Tsukasa shattered like glass when her older sister's body went limp and her breathing stopped. The youngest Hiiragi twin began to shake her sister's lifeless body while screaming her name. Her voice was enough to break the spirit of even the strongest human and the sight of Tsukasa crying over her sister would only further their dismay as Izumi Wakase still stood above them.

The psychotic student watched Tsukasa cry and scream over the motionless Kagami and she squinted her eyes. She made sure a live round was chambered and when it was, Wakase approached Tsukasa and gently placed the barrel of the gun to the back of her head. She held the position and continued to take in Tsukasa's crying. The youngest Hiiragi twin knew the gun was digging into her hair but she didn't care anymore. If she couldn't be on Earth with Kagami, she didn't want to be there at all.

"Not the exact chronological order of events I wanted things to transpire…but this works just as well." Wakase said and wrapped her finger around the trigger. "I just wanted to let you know before I kill you…I'm doing you a favor. You wouldn't have amounted to anything in life anyway…not without Kagami. You're weak and pathetic without her Tsukasa…a hollowed shell of a human, if you will. Anyway…goodbye, Tsukasa Hiiragi."

Wakase began to squeeze the trigger. Tsukasa's life with Kagami and her family flashed one image after another when she closed her eyes. They disappeared when Tsukasa felt a human grab her and pull her aside in the darkness she threw herself in. When Tsukasa opened her eyes when she crashed to the ground, she saw life once again jolt an angry Kagami alive and she grabbed Wakase's hand holding the gun. The enraged twin-tailed girl pulled Wakase down and her forehead made precision contact with her nose, breaking it and sending blood flying out of her nostrils as Wakase dropped the gun again and stumbled backward holding her bleeding nose.

"Tsukasa…janitor closet!" Kagami screamed and pointed to a door she was resting next to. The youngest Hiiragi twin took her sister's cue when she heard the wristwatch on Izumi Wakase's arm begin beeping. The time for detonation had arrived.

Still dazed and confused by the violent knock, Wakase shook her head and looked up to see Tsukasa drag her sister into the janitor's closet and shut the door just as three armed operatives from the Special Assault Team rounded a corner with their weapons fixed on Izumi Wakase.

"Let me see your hands!" He shouted.

Izumi Wakase lowered her hands, revealing her bleeding nose and a look of pure evil with a smile to complement it. With her last breath and words she screamed, "Bombs away, fuckers!"

Yui found herself saddled with a herculean task of not only calming her little sister down, but also her little cousin. Konata continued to cry as she sat on the curb across the street of Ryoo High School while Yutaka continued to weep for Minami making the ultimate sacrifice for her.

Tadao and Miki Hiiragi still stood by the yellow police tape and continued to watch more wounded and dead students being carried out of the school. Their spirits were lifted when they saw Konata and Miyuki reemerge with the other students they carried and they anticipated Kagami and Tsukasa were right behind them. Tadao wrapped his hand around his wife's hip and pulled

her close as she rested her hand on his chest.

Inori and Matsuri slowly joined their hands when they saw Konata escape the school. Though they never had a formal relationship with one of Kagami's best friends, they knew that if Konata was nearby, Kagami and Tsukasa had to be too. They smiled anxiously and waited to see their younger twin sisters come running out. Though they wouldn't say it, they could both picture Kagami giving the crying Tsukasa a piggyback ride out of the school.

Honoka Iwasaki spotted Yutaka Kobayakawa being led out of the school by a blue-haired girl and her spirits too were lifted. She knew that Yutaka idolized her daughter and that they were in the same class so if the salmon-haired girl made it out then Minami had to be close behind. It would make sense to her that Minami would want Yutaka out first.

With all their eyes fixated on the school, they had to avert then when the truly unexpected followed.

The light of a thousand burning suns erupted in the entire third level of the school. It was so bright that it burned the eyes of all who stared at it and it quickly prompted them to look away. A sudden and violent blast of fire and wind tore through the windows and engulfed the floor in flames, which was abruptly followed by a shockwave explosion that blew every onlooker off their feet and blew out windows of nearby buildings. The fiery explosion swallowed the school in a giant curtain of unspeakable brightness and heat that lifted skyward and made the already bright and sunny day even more beaming.

The violent shockwave tore the rear rotor blade of the SAT helicopter to pieces, sending it into a violent tailspin until it slammed into the street, knocking over pedestrian cars and crashing into a store until it too exploded in a massive fireball that overturned two ambulances and sent people flying like paper caught in the wind. The fireball continued to spread through the gas pipes of Ryoo High School and when it reached the main furnace headquartered in the central building, the once majestic school disappeared in another mushroom cloud of bright flames and black smoke. Another shockwave cracked the

ground open and split the streets, creating sinkholes that several more cars and people fell into as the screaming intensified but was drowned out by the explosion. The shockwave rattled all of Saitama and was felt in all of Tokyo and beyond.

Debris including bricks, wood, glass, and steel rained down on the scattering onlookers. Some were crushed or sliced by the falling debris and the news helicopters above were also forced to flee. One couldn't make it in time when a steel beam landed on top of the main rotor blade, crushing it and smashing into the glass cockpit and the flying machine began falling to Earth. In the midst of the panic, no one noticed it when it crashed in the schoolyard and exploded in another fireball, sending more people, mostly the wounded students, flying in every direction as if they were confetti.

His vision blurred and his hearing a giant ringing bell, Tadao Hiiragi slowly looked up from his position as he rested on the ground. He was once again on top of his wife, shielding her from the explosion and falling debris. Tadao shook his head violently in futile attempts to get his hearing back and he looked around. He saw his two oldest daughters ducking and covering but they were physically okay as their scrambling movements to their feet showed.

Tadao helped his wife to her feet and when she saw the entire school ablaze, she sank back to the ground again. She screamed the names of her two twin daughters and cried excruciatingly at what she had just seen. The school her daughters worked so hard to get into was now one giant inferno and the screams and cries of the other parents surrounding her only illustrated the tragedy. Tadao lowered himself to his wife, struggling to keep his own tears in but Inori and Matsuri weren't helping as they too released their emotions.

Honoka Iwasaki was helped to her feet by other onlookers and it didn't take long for her to join them in her wails of sorrow. She screamed her daughter's name, hoping she would hear it but she couldn't even hear her own voice over the burning carnage. She felt so alone with her daughter still missing in a school now a giant wall of flames and her husband overseas on a business trip. Yet deep inside her, she couldn't accept defeat and kept crying

Minami's name.

Reemerging from their shelter of another car, Yui looked up and saw the school ablaze and it only deepened the full-scale tragedy of what would become everybody's new lifestyle. Friends and families were now destroyed by this event that was now officially over. What would become of Konata now? What would become of Yutaka now? What would become of Yui now? Would she now have to play the role of sister, cousin, and mother all at once if her uncle died? Seeing the crying faces of Konata and Yutaka only made these questions burrow themselves deeper into her mind and she didn't know what to do anymore. For the first time in her entire life and all her training as a police officer, she didn't know what to do. However, she did do the one last thing that she did know how to do. She hugged Konata and Yutaka closely and tightly.

The Hiiragi family, now a seemingly fractured party, watched the school continue to burn as now new sirens of fire trucks began to arrive on the scene. The blaze though was already out of control and the school beyond repair. The helicopters continued to burn in the street and schoolyard as the fires spread to neighboring buildings by either flying debris or the SAT Black Hawk helicopter that crashed into the street and collided with another building before exploding.

Suddenly, more people began to emerge out of Ryoo High School. To everyone's horror though, their skin was blackened and charred as they screamed in agonizing pain. Some students and staff were still on fire as they tried to stop, drop, and roll to smother the flames while others tried to bat the others out with whatever they could find.

Still resting on her knees, Miki remembered giving birth to her twins and raising them. She remembered crying though with less devastation at some of their more fond memories, including when they were accepted into Ryoo High School. All seemed lost to her now.

"Mom, dad, look…!" Inori screamed with all her might.

Tadao and Miki looked up and saw their oldest daughter pointing to something at the burning school. At one exit with the doors blown off where hardly and flames were emerging from, they saw two shadows begin to form and take shape as they got closer to the exit through the black smoke. Two female students suddenly burst through the black smoke, one carrying the other with one of their arms around the other's shoulder. It was the distinct yellow ribbon that was still sitting in one of the heads, though blackened, torn, and charred.

Tsukasa Hiiragi carried her older sister Kagami Hiiragi out of the school as she cried and screamed for help. Their uniforms were burned, covered in their sweat, blood, and tear stains as Tsukasa moved her sister away from the school. Miki couldn't be restrained anymore and tore through the yellow police tape screaming her daughters' names as Tadao, Inori, and Matsuri followed.

The youngest Hiiragi daughter finally fell to her knees in the green grass where it wasn't covered in blood or bodies and held Kagami in her lap as she cried. The twin-tailed girl was still breathing and was still conscious, but she continued to slowly die in Tsukasa's arms.

Miki finally slid next to Kagami and whispered with crying eyes, "Mommy's here, Kagami…mommy's here."

Tadao arrived and immediately turned away and began searching for a free paramedic, though it soon proved impossible in light of the late Izumi Wakase's bomb. Inori and Matsuri crouched down and also hovered over their dying sister as she coughed more blood and became paler in the day's brightening warm sunrays.

"Tsukasa…you're safe now…" Kagami whispered. "Please… please…be safe for me…"

"Sis, no! You're not going to die, you hear me?!" Tsukasa screamed back as more of her tears fell onto Kagami's head. "You're not going to die! You're going to be just fine! We're gonna get you help and we're gonna go home and cook that special dinner together! Just you and me!"

Kagami smiled lightly through her dying face. "Make it…make it extra special…for me…"

"Kagami…Kagami you can't die! You can't die! What am I gonna do without you?!" Tsukasa wailed and hugged her sister tight.

The twin-tailed girl moved her lips closer to Tsukasa's ear. "You're…you're gonna make me proud. That's what you're gonna do. Make…me…proud…"

"You…you said you would…you would always be with me!" Tsukasa wailed again. "You said that you…that you would never leave me again! Back in the classroom when you found me! You promised me that!"

Kagami nodded weakly with more blood oozing from between her lips. "I'll…I'll always be with you, sis. Always…forever."

"Sis…" Tsukasa whispered and looked her in the eyes through her watery vision. "I love you. Thank you…for protecting me…"

Kagami slowly lifted her hand up again and rested it on Tsukasa's cheek and she instinctively nestled against its depleting warmth. With a final smile, Kagami whispered, "You're my sister…I love you, too. Be strong, Tsukasa Hiiragi…be strong."

As Tsukasa closed her eyes and let more tears slip from her eyes, the warmth she felt with her sister's hand against her cheek suddenly disappeared. Tsukasa snapped her eyes open just in time to see her older and beloved twin sister close her eyelids and her arm fell to the side, making her body go limp. Tsukasa once again cried her sister's name as she held her in her lap as Miki joined her, as did Inori and Matsuri. Tadao also returned and upon seeing his daughter resting in the lap of his youngest and deceased, he too fell onto the pile and cried loudly.

The family cried for Kagami as the school behind them continued to burn, as well as the world around them. Sirens and helicopter blades chopping through the air masked their cries of dismay as

firefighters struggled with the blazes. More people cried and screamed in agony from their wounds or losses of loved ones.

Miyuki Takara, battered, bruised, and bloodied, looked around herself at the bloody scenes of anarchy and chaos. She wanted to help everyone but her nerves broke her down again as the only thing she could whisper was, "I don't know what to do…"

Yutaka pulled away from her hug with Yui. The salmon-haired girl looked up at her sister with the look of a devastated baby and whispered, "Onee-chan…can we go home now?"

Yui sniffed and nodded. "Yes, Yutaka, we can go home now."

A/N: And at long last, the shooting at Ryoo High School is over. Now the drama will begin…

CHAPTER 13

Konata didn't know what was more devastating for her. The fact that this day started out so majestically only to end in bloodshed, the fact that she lost so many friends today, including her best friend in Kagami Hiiragi, or the fact that she now sat in a hospital room hovering over her father who rested on a bed and in a coma. With tear-filled eyes, she watched Sojiro Izumi continue to sleep with a large body bandage wrapped around his torso from the bullet the school shooting inflicted onto him. Medical tubes and hoses attached to his body and to machines monitoring his condition only further showed the decrepit state he was in.

She couldn't take her eyes off her father. He rested right in front of her, yet she couldn't wake him up. He wasn't dead nor was he alive. He was stuck in-between and Konata felt so helpless as the only thing she could do to help was watch. She desperately wanted to just shake him by the shoulders and scream his name until he would wake up, as if he was truly just in a deep state of slumber, yet Konata knew it would be a losing battle without even trying it first. She now contemplated the same questions that Yui was pondering earlier regarding what was going to become of her. Was she about to become an orphan or would her

father wake up though she would be confined to be a nurse for him for the rest of their lives? So many uncertainties and too many tragedies in one day.

This day was still far from over. It was only two o'clock in the afternoon and she could still hear the endless commotion outside. The hospital was still flooding with wounded students and staff from the still-burning Ryoo High School, this time with the absolute worst burn injuries. They were still hiding in classrooms when the bomb went off and lit up every gas pipe like a fireworks show, it only resulted in more carnage and death. Some students were killed instantly while others were burned alive while the unlucky ones survived their horrid injuries and were going to live with permanent burns.

Konata's only companion the isolation and the deafening quiet she basked in, she clutched a wet and wrinkled handkerchief in her hand from her incessant tears while she sat. She sniffed again as more of the teardrops escaped her eyes and fell around her. The blue-haired girl trembled and shook with broken emotions as she contemplated her next move. What was she to do now? She was never a big fan of watching the news but couldn't help but ask herself who else she knew was hit by this tragedy, though she didn't want to see anything that would remind her of it.

A knock on the door didn't faze her, even when it opened and Yui stepped in. Her uniform still stained in small spots of her uncle's blood, she pulled a chair over to Konata's side and hugged her tightly. Konata was passive and even reluctant at first, but couldn't hide the fact that she wanted to feel the warmth of human comfort and she hugged her cousin tightly.

"How's…how's Yu-chan?" Konata whispered while pinching her eyes shut.

Yui continued to pat Konata on the shoulders. "She's okay. I was finally able to get her home and my mother says she's asleep now. Today…it really took it out of her."

Konata pulled away. "Look Yui-nee-san, maybe it isn't her they identified. Maybe it was someone else with pigtails that died and

they just mistook the identity."

Her cousin shook her head. Yui knew that Konata was trying to run away from reality and try to pretend it wasn't Kagami that Tsukasa pulled out of the school but it was. "I'm sorry Konata, but it was her. Her family was there and everything. Kagami's death was already confirmed by paramedics and doctors."

The blue-haired girl closed her eyes and began to cry again while trying to bury her face in her handkerchief. She whispered Kagami's name through another cry while shaking her head. Konata still couldn't believe or accept the fact that her best friend had died this way. It wasn't supposed to end this way for her. Tsukasa's speech to Wakase earlier in the classroom before Minami showed up still echoed in her mind. The youngest Hiiragi daughter said that these were supposed to be the best years of their lives and they were supposed to be enjoying every day of them with each other. Yet Kagami was now gone.

"What…what about the others?" Konata asked, still trying to hide in denial.

Yui sighed deeply. "Ayano Minegishi is expected to make a full recovery, but she was clearly traumatized by the event. Misao Kusakabe's body was found in the nurse's office, and Patricia Martin was also located and recovered by the SAT."

Trying to remain strong, Konata added, "And what about Hiyorin?"

"Last time I checked she's still in surgery and we won't know anything for a few more hours." Yui grew tired of her little cousin's constant demands for her to use all her time to check on her friends. She understood Konata's pain and sympathized but at the same time she still had a job to do and she had a responsibility to all who needed her help. Yui rose to her feet and said, "I have to get back to work, Konata. I was ordered to return to the school to help direct the rescue and recovery vehicles through the mess."

As the policewoman stood and began to walk towards the door,

she felt Konata's petite hand wrap around her arm and pull her back. She looked back down at her cousin and felt a thousand knives strike her heart and soul when she saw the look on the blue-haired girl's face. She had never seen Konata in such a broken state as her crying and wailing face illustrated as it leaked more tears and she breathed and trembled deeply.

"Please…please don't leave me alone, Yui-nee-san…!" She cried. "I…I don't know what…to…do…! I'm so scared!"

Yui turned back and held onto Konata's shoulders. "Look, I know you're scared and devastated by this horrible tragedy but I promise you, no matter what happens to your father or anyone else you care about that was hurt today, I will always be here for you. Always. Do you understand?"

Konata sniffed and nodded lightly.

Yui nodded back. "I'll call my husband and have him stop by to sit with you."

The distraught blue-haired girl slowly sat back down again and scooted her chair closer to her father. It was a hard sight to watch for the police officer, especially when she saw Konata take Sojiro's lifeless hand and hold it to her cheek while releasing more tears. Yui sighed to herself while shaking her head at this day's grotesque physical and mental consequences for all involved and left the hospital room while taking out her cell phone and called her husband, who fortunately was at home for once in light of this event.

In the midst of Konata's despair, she forgot to ask about Tsukasa. What transpired between her, Kagami, and Izumi Wakase was still a mystery to her and she didn't know how Kagami ended up with a fatal wound. Also, she wondered how the Hiiragi twins were able to survive the blast despite still being in the school when it happened. Even being able to escape together without any help from either the police, SAT, or firefighters baffled the blue-haired girl.

Konata sat back in her chair and continued to hold her father's

hand close to her face. Despite the fact that he was still technically alive, it didn't give any comfort to Konata, especially when his hand was ice-cold in comparison to the warm and burning flesh on her flushed face. Shaking her head, Konata sniffed loudly and shook her head.

"It's okay. Everything is going to be okay. My dad is going to fine…Tsukasa is okay…and they mistook Kagami's identity. They had to. There's no way she would've succumbed to such a petty fate. Kagami is still alive…" Konata's strained voice began to show how little she wanted to deal with her surroundings.

(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)

In the center of Tokyo at another swamped hospital, a pink-haired girl sat in a waiting room with many other concerned and even crying people. Miyuki Takara was waiting anxiously for her wounded mother to reemerge from the storm of dead and dying. Despite seeing so much bloodshed and carnage in one day, Miyuki had the luxury of taking comfort in the fact that the doctors informed her that her mother was going to be fine expected to make a full recovery. There was no serious nerve, bone, or muscle damage by the projectile and she was going to be able to walk out of the hospital.

As she sat, the scream of a woman to her right pierced her eardrums and she turned her head to a devastating sight. She saw her neighbor Honoka Iwasaki collapse into the arms of a doctor and scream Minami's name over and over as she cried endlessly. Miyuki felt her face constrict and her eyes filled with moisture. Watching the green-haired woman cry for her deceased daughter only drove a spike into Miyuki's kind and gentle heart.

She couldn't take it any longer and she stood as the doctor helped Honoka to her feet and sat her in a chair. Miyuki approached the ailing woman and placed her hand on her shoulder as she kept her face covered with her hands while she vented her spew of broken emotions over the loss of her daughter. Feeling this new hand on her shoulder sent an unexpected and unexplainable sense of comfort and warmth into Honoka and she slowly lifted her face out of her hands and saw Miyuki, also with a crying face.

Seeing the pink-haired girl standing before her only made Honoka cry louder and Miyuki quickly sat down next to her and hugged her tightly and her late friend's mother mimicked the gesture by also pulling her tight. Miyuki knew there wasn't much she could do to help ease the woman's devastation but did know that simply being there was still something at the very least. She sniffed and tried to pull away from the hug but Honoka's unquenchable thirst for comfort made her keep a tight grip on Miyuki. It took several more minutes until Honoka's meltdown sapped away her strength, which allowed the pink-haired girl to pull away and grip the upset woman by her shoulders.

"I…Iwasaki-san…" Miyuki whispered with a choppy voice. "Mi… Minami…she was…she was…"

The pink-haired girl gulped in a futile attempt to swallow her shattered emotions as Honoka continued to try and listen.

"She…she's a hero. She…she saved…Yutaka-chan. She took the bullet for her." Miyuki whimpered as she took her glasses off to wipe her tears away. "She saved all of us back there at school. You…you should be very proud. I'm…I'm going to…miss her… very much. She was like…my own sister."

Miyuki finished her personal testimony and once again went on a downward spiral of traumatized emotions when she covered her face and began to weep. She didn't expect to feel Honoka wrap her arms around her and sob with her but it comforted Miyuki deeply when she did. Honoka was friends with Miyuki's mother for a long time and while Miyuki viewed Minami as her little sister, she didn't know that the green-haired woman viewed her as another daughter and loved her like one. Hearing those words come from Miyuki deepened Honoka's distraught yet at the same time sent waves of comfort and euphoria into her mind and body, yet for now only the disparity was in control.

Still, hearing that her daughter died a hero and sacrificed herself to save Yutaka made her feel some sense of peace as well. It was confirmed for her that her only daughter and child was among the dead, but to know that she truly made a glimmering difference for the better in the seemingly endless bloodbath at

Ryoo High School made the ailing mother feel that none of her trials and tribulations as a parent were in vain.

"Ex…excuse me? But…but did I hear that you're Minami Iwasaki's mother?" A voice asked from behind Honoka and Miyuki.

The two looked up and behind Honoka and they saw three students from Ryoo High School in bandaged wounds. One had his arm bandaged and in a sling while a female student had her leg wrapped in a cast and was walking with a crutch and the third male student had a bandaged wrapped around his head covering his left eye. They were both out of their school uniforms and in hospital robes as part of their recovery efforts.

Honoka slowly stood and nodded, making a few more tears fall from her eyes.

The lead male student with the bandaged arm cleared his throat. "Ma'am…I just wanted to say that I was wounded in the shooting this morning. I tried to run out of the school but was losing too much blood and ended up near the gym. Your daughter saved me. She was wounded herself but ignored her pain and helped me into a locker room and helped treat my wound."

"Me too." The female student with the wounded leg stepped forward. "I was shot in the leg and the killer was looking for me but Minami also guided me into the locker room to help bandage my wound. She said she wanted to be a registered nurse when she was done with school. She…she's a hero."

"That's true." The final male student said with his head wrapped tightly. "The doctors told me I'm going to lose the sight in my left eye because of flying glass…but I just as easily could've lost my life today. If it wasn't for Minami taking my hand and showing me into the locker room to help me…I probably would be dead. Thank you…for raising such an incredible girl."

The first student stepped forward again. "We tried to get her to stay with us as well as the others she rescued but she wouldn't. She said something about needing to make sure another friend was safe. I believe her name was Yutaka or something. All I can

say is God bless her soul."

Only more tears flowed out of Honoka's eyes as she covered her mouth with both hands and cried silently again. She was completely drained of energy so the only response she could give was a nod of appreciation and the students took it from there. The three wounded students approached Honoka and embraced her tightly, making the green-haired woman weep more deeply as Miyuki took a step back and dried her eyes again.

"Miyuki, dear?" A familiar voice asked that made the pink-haired girl's heart race.

Miyuki quickly turned and saw her mother with a bandaged shoulder and her arm resting in a sling but otherwise in good health. Seeing her mother simply standing there despite the ensuing chaos around them brought some sense of relief for Miyuki as it seemed that she was incredibly lucky and blessed unlike most of her friends.

Regardless, the crying pink-haired girl felt her eyes liberate unprecedented amounts of water as she ran across the crowded waiting room and gently hugged her mother while minding her injury. Yukari on the other hand wasn't so conservative with her wound and bluntly hugged her daughter tightly while ignoring some of the pain caused by the physical endorsement. Despite being wounded, her motherly instincts remained undeterred as she kissed Miyuki on the top of her head.

"There, there, Miyuki, I'm here and it's all over now." She whispered with a cheery and loving voice. "Let me take you home. Let me take you home and we'll get through all of this together. I'm your mother and I'm always going to be here for you."

"...Mama..." Miyuki whispered quietly in her tears. "Minami... she's...she's..."

Yukari nodded. "I know, dear. I know. I'm so sorry this had to happen to you but I promise you we'll get through this together. I love you so much."

Miyuki nodded with her face still buried in the sanctuary of her mother's chest. The pink-haired girl continued to unleash her wails of pain and sorrow for her fallen friend but still tried to think about all the lives that Minami saved during the massacre. She was not only a good friend to her and Yutaka, but a friend to everyone for the sacrifice she made. What was going to come next though for Miyuki and her friends was what she feared the most though. Having to recover from this ordeal. The pink-haired girl had a sinking feeling the fragmented group of friends had another storm on the horizon they were going to have to face.

(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)

Trembling with unprecedented and relentless angst, Miki Hiiragi rested in a chair sitting at her dinner table at the family home. A mug of steaming coffee sat on the table in front of her as she covered her face with her hands and continued to cry silently. A pool of tears sat below her complementing the coffee mug. For her, a mother's worst nightmare had come to fruition when she saw the life in her daughter's eyes fade until it disappeared completely. She watched from beginning to end the last seconds of Kagami's life as she held her in her arms along with Tsukasa and the rest of the family.

One of the things that made it worse for the Hiiragi housewife was the toll this devastating loss on her youngest daughter. Tsukasa's idol was gone and the worst part was Miki couldn't honestly say to her that everything was going to be okay. Tsukasa herself was in the same condition as Yutaka was. She cried herself to sleep with the nightmarish events of today finally complete, though with her forever. What words or life experiences could Miki possibly divulge to Tsukasa that would reach her at a mental and personal level that would be of some comfort? Miki pondered this question again and again and when she kept coming up empty, it only further proved to her that there was nothing she could do for Tsukasa to take her pain away.

And what of Inori and Matsuri? They were directly affected by the shooting at Ryoo High School too. Kagami was their sister as well. Granted they were older than Kagami and they were well

on their way to moving out of the family home and finding their own lives, but the twin-tailed girl was still their little sister. How was this going to affect them as well? Miki looked up from her tear-drenched hands and sniffed again. Inori was going to graduate from college soon and was looking at different careers while Matsuri was already thinking about marriage. She had always boasted about how much she loved Western secularism and desired to have a foreign husband and even get married in a wedding dress.

Matsuri herself was acting different in the weeks prior to the shooting. Normally she was quick to anger or easily flustered when something didn't suit her, but lately she had been so easy to get along with and was always smiling, giggling, and happy. As a mother, Miki believed that her daughter was smitten with someone but she didn't want to pry into Matsuri's life. The middle Hiiragi daughter always knew that she could tell her parents anything and when the time was right, she would come clean about whatever she was hiding.

These thoughts that swirled in her mind were suddenly brushed aside when she heard her front door open and close. She looked up and saw her beloved husband in Tadao walk in carrying a large bundle of flowers.

"More?" Miki sniffed.

Tadao nodded with a broken face. "More. These came from the Takagi family down the street."

Miki nodded and burrowed her face in her hands away from the bouquet of sympathy. Receiving all these gifts didn't bring her or her family any closure or security when they released the news that Kagami had died in the shooting. The only gift that could heal this kind of wound inflicted onto the Hiiragi family would be a time machine so they could keep both their daughters home and protected from the vicious onslaught.

Her husband took a seat next to her and continued to do his duties for his significant other despite the pain he felt as well. He pulled the ravaged Miki close and when she knew she was in his

protective embrace, she continued to let it all out. She cried again into his chest as he rubbed her back and shoulders. Fighting off his own tears soon proved to be impossible and he also let it out with silence. Though he loved Kagami at the same level as his wife did, he knew that the bond between a mother and her child was something nobody except another mother would be able to comprehend. Miki carried both Kagami and Tsukasa for nine months inside her and it was during her pregnancy where these bonds for all her children cemented themselves within every essence of her being.

Now a piece of her was taken away in one of the most horrendous and violent ways possible. As a mother, she felt so helpless and that she even failed as a mother. She remembered being forced to stay behind the yellow police tape surrounding Ryoo High School and the only thing she could do to help her twin daughters was to stand outside and keep screaming their names as the claps of gunfire continued to echo in the hallways and classrooms. With a family of six people, the Hiiragi family had weathered some rather strenuous periods whether it was financial, spiritual, or mental. However, they had never encountered a tragedy in their family as grave as this. One of their own was no more.

After Miki continued to release herself, the front door opened and closed again. Matsuri Hiiragi soon stepped into the kitchen, also drying her wet, puffy eyes. She slowly sat down across from Miki and Tadao.

"I…I've been feeling…so ashamed." Matsuri sniffed, making Miki look up from her husband's embrace while also catching Tadao's attention. "Kagami…we were sisters…and she was always there… but…but I wasn't a good sister. I was…I was always quick to get angry with her. I…I didn't spend enough time with her. I…I just wish I could take it all back. To let her know that I…that I…love her."

Seeing Matsuri break down again prompted Miki to quickly stand and maneuver her way across the table to sit next to her middle daughter. She shushed her gently and whispered while hugging her, "There, there, Matsuri. Don't even think such things. Kagami always knew you loved her despite the quarrels you two have

had. Kagami had nothing but admiration and respect for you because she always knew that despite everything, you had nothing but the best interest of her and our family in your heart."

Matsuri gripped her mother's arms to absorb more of her feminine comfort. She nodded and desperately wanted to tell her parents something. She was keeping a secret from the family. Today was going to be the day she had planned to tell them everything but now she didn't know what to do. Matsuri knew it was going to be news that would be bittersweet for her family but ultimately she believed that they would love and accept it with open arms. Now however, it just didn't seem to be the right time. She needed to be alone again and quickly excused herself from her parents. Neither Miki nor Tadao saw it as out of the ordinary and believed it was Matsuri's way of mourning Kagami and they quickly held each other again.

Matsuri climbed the stairs to her bedroom and brushed past Tsukasa's closed door. She stopped and put her ear to the door but didn't hear anything and concluded the youngest Hiiragi daughter was still asleep. The middle Hiiragi daughter finally made it to her room and quickly closed the door, as if she was in a hurry to hide something.

She sat on her bed while hugging her legs to her chest and she quickly covered her face again. Sobbing quietly again, she heard her cell phone vibrate on her nightstand, telling her she had received a text message. She picked up her phone and saw the name on it and she gulped. The man who had texted her was her secret. Her boyfriend, an English teacher from the United States working at a prep school in Tokyo. He wanted to call her and talk to her about what had happened, but Matsuri wanted to talk to him about a different matter. Something that also came with a bittersweet price tag.

After secretly dating him for nearly six months, she admitted that she was in love with him, but now she was just scared as she reached under her pillow. She gripped a plastic object and withdrew it and when she saw the symbolic result, she felt the tears come again, all from sadness, fear, and happiness. She was holding a pregnancy test with the result.

Matsuri Hiiragi was pregnant.

CHAPTER 14

The youngest Hiiragi daughter suddenly awoke with a start. Tsukasa rested on her bed and quickly sprung up while looking around anxiously. With the haunting memory of a dream involving her older twin sister still fresh in her mind, she got out from under her covers and exited her bedroom. She walked past Matsuri's closed door and to the end of the hall, where Kagami's door stood closed.

Growing more anxious with every step, Tsukasa finally reached her sister's door and grabbed the door handle. Normally she would knock but the dream she had prompted her to bypass the formalities and she pushed it open.

"Sis…?" Tsukasa exclaimed anxiously and entered the room.

A whoosh of cold and empty air was the only thing that greeted her when she stepped into her sister's bedroom. Like a lost child looking for its mother, Tsukasa darted her eyes and head in every corner of the room, desperately searching for any signs of life within the dark and empty space. It was a heartbreaking sight to see Tsukasa wander around the clean yet empty room calling for Kagami until reality found her once again. Tsukasa realized once again that she wasn't living in her dream anymore and she was back on Earth, a place where Kagami no longer existed.

Feeling her knees turn to jelly, Tsukasa's eyes flooded again and she sank to the floor. She covered her face and once again began to cry for her departed sister. She cried her name and continued to turn herself into a depressing, teary mess until she looked up and spotted her sister's neatly-made bed. It was a total habit of Kagami to wake up in the morning and immediately turn and make her bed.

Tsukasa pulled herself up to her hands and knees and began to crawl over to the bed until she climbed on top of the structure and curled into a crying ball as she grabbed the pillow. She pulled it close to her face and a familiar fragrance found its way

into her nostrils. Tsukasa hugged the pillow closer and continued to sniff the pillow case that was ripe with the smell of Kagami's favorite shampoo. The sobbing Tsukasa continued to breathe the smell in but it only brought more tears to her eyes.

"I'm here, Kagami. I'm right here for you…" Tsukasa whispered to the pillow while still trying to hug it tighter and tighter, possibly in the hopes of her body absorbing it. "You've always been there for me…you saved my life…so I'm never going to leave you, sis. I'm here, Kagami…I'm here…"

The youngest Hiiragi daughter continued to cry endlessly while hugging her sister's pillow close to her trembling body. Hearing the sounds of the distraught girl crying for her deceased sibling attracted the oldest Hiiragi daughter, Inori Hiiragi. Inori approached Kagami's door and peeked inside and she felt as if her heart was put through a shredder when she saw Tsukasa on Kagami's bed. She had just completed another crying episode and now she felt another one was possibly imminent when she saw her youngest sister crying over Kagami's pillow.

Regardless, Inori put her own feelings of anguish aside as she knew that her little sister needed her. Inori slowly walked into Kagami's room without even catching the broken Tsukasa's attention. It wasn't until she sat down that made Tsukasa suddenly jolt up with a hopeful face, as if she was expecting someone else. When her hopes were suddenly dashed by the sight of her oldest sister, Tsukasa once again nestled her face into Kagami's pillow.

"I'm sorry I disappointed you, Tsukasa. I bet you were hoping I was somebody else." Inori whispered.

Hearing Inori's observation only made Tsukasa tighten herself around the pillow and weep louder. "I…I had a dream…about Kagami."

Inori tilted her head. "What about Kagami?"

Sniffing again, Tsukasa looked up at her sister with teary, blood-shot eyes. "I dreamt that we were walking together side-by-side

at the train station that we use to go to school. She started to get further ahead of me and I tried to keep up but she kept getting farther away. I was soon running while calling her name to slow down until she disappeared over the horizon and then I was alone and scared. The emotions I felt. I felt so helpless when I was crying her name and she couldn't hear me. That's when I woke up."

Inori nodded slowly. "And you wanted to keep looking for her. I'm so sorry, Tsukasa."

Tsukasa nodded gently. "I…I feel so weak. Kagami was always my shield. She was always looking out for me and now…I feel so defenseless. Everything I thought I ever knew about life is gone. I don't know what to do or who to trust without her by side…"

Sighing, Inori began to gently rub her crying sister's shoulders. "Kagami was my sister too, Tsukasa. She taught me so much and the world is a lesser place without her."

To Inori's surprise, Tsukasa stopped crying and tightened her grip on her pillow. "It's okay…because I still have Kagami right here. She's still here."

Confused at first, Inori suddenly put it together when she saw Tsukasa pull Kagami's pillow closer to her face and begin to sniff again. Inori gulped at the sight and slowly rose to her feet while watching Tsukasa cling to the pillow.

"Tsukasa…are you okay?" Inori asked.

Tsukasa nodded and held the pillow up. "I'm okay…because I have Kagami right here. She can't run away from me now…"

Inori gulped again and slowly began to back out of the room. "I see…well…tell her that I love her and we're glad she's still here with us."

Tsukasa nodded. "I think she knows that. Would it be okay for us to be alone for awhile? I just want to talk to sis for a moment."

Feeling her nerves trembling, Inori felt her knees creak and crack as she slowly moved backwards towards the door while keeping her eyes on Tsukasa through her horrified face who still hugged Kagami's pillow. She gulped again when she finally backed out of the room and slowly closed it while leaving it open slightly. Inori still watched through the cracked door with concern for Tsukasa, who once again curled into a ball while hugging the pillow close to her body. The oldest Hiiragi daughter knew Tsukasa had just been through an incredibly traumatic experience only a few hours ago and had lost someone she truly and deeply cared about. However, what she was witnessing now from Tsukasa was truly disturbing and frightening. Tsukasa still wasn't able to accept Kagami's death and now it appeared to Inori that she was trying to deal with it in a rather unconventional and more than likely problematic matter.

It was when Inori heard Tsukasa begin to whisper to the pillow and call it Kagami that confirmed for her that the Hiiragi family might have more problems on the horizon than just a death in the family. Tsukasa was showing budding signs of a mental disorder being brought on by the harrowing events of the school shooting.

Inori turned and began to walk down the hallway just as Matsuri's door opened and she stepped out. The auburn-haired girl looked in both directions, as if she was making sure the coast was clear but when she saw Inori approaching her, she quickly closed her door and walked towards her bigger sister.

"I have something to tell you." Matsuri said.

"I think we have a problem." Inori said.

The two sisters both said their sentences at once, making it an inaudible clatter of noise, though Matsuri was able to hear "problem" from Inori and Inori was able to hear "tell you." There was an awkward pause between the two of them, as if they were waiting for the other to speak first. Inori, being the polite young woman that she was, waited for Matsuri to speak her mind first, but she had clammed up. Because of the offsetting scene Inori had witnessed from Tsukasa, she didn't notice that Matsuri had

lost the nerve to tell her what was on her mind.

"Um…go ahead, Matsuri." Inori said.

Matsuri remained silent until she shook her head. "No, no that's okay. You said something about a problem?"

Still not knowing what to make of her sister's dismissive conduct, Inori soon ignored it, cleared her throat and spoke. "I said I think we have a problem…with Tsukasa. She's in Kagami's room right now talking to her pillow and calling it Kagami."

Matsuri's eyebrows raised and she moved her head to the side to look down the hallway at Kagami's room, where the door was still open a crack. She looked back at Inori and said, "You think she's losing it?"

Just hearing the idea of Tsukasa surviving the school shooting only to collapse mentally made Inori want to cry again while knowing the reason. She shook her head and replied, "I don't know. I think we should tell mom and dad…but they're still down there crying over Kagami. I don't know what to do."

Matsuri looked at the staircase that would lead them to their kitchen where their parents still sat and mourned one of their departed daughters and then back at Inori. "If something is wrong with Tsukasa, we need to tell them. There's no sense in taking a wait and see approach for her, only to run the risk of us losing another sister."

Inori nodded in agreement and began to turn to walk down the stairs as Matsuri followed. Inori suddenly stopped and turned back to Matsuri. "Wait, wasn't there something you wanted to tell me?"

Matsuri stiffened like a board and quickly shook her head while clenching her fists. "No it was…it was nothing. Forget about it."

Inori nodded and proceeded to walk downstairs again as Matsuri followed. The auburn-haired Hiiragi daughter got cold feet in her

attempt to confess her secret pregnancy to her older sister. However, she felt that waiting once again to tell them was for the best as it seemed that Tsukasa was now in danger.

(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)

With numbed enthusiasm, Konata perused through the hospital gift shop searching for the perfect get well soon presents for her friend, Kagami. Still convinced the twin-tailed girl was still alive, Konata already held a stuffed rabbit with a red heart embedded on its stomach, as well as a bouquet of flowers. Now all she needed was the perfect card so she could make the ensemble complete. All the while she was just like Tsukasa in her inability to accept the fact that Kagami was dead.

Konata searched for a card for over half an hour with a broken smile on her face. Her demeanor was even beginning to make the gift shop employee behind the cash register worry. It was when he saw Konata begin to speak to the stuffed rabbit that prompted him to pick up the phone and call security. He heard the blue-haired girl say how much her friend was going to enjoy the rabbit and how it looked just like her with the long ears. Her overall demeanor and the waves she gave off also made the gift shop worker concerned but he was relieved when two security guards approached.

After informing them of his suspicions, the two guards approached Konata, who was still rooted at the card section. One approached the short girl and said, "Young lady, is everything okay?"

Konata nodded, still with blood-shot eyes from her tears. "Yes, I'm fine. I'm just looking for a card for my friend. Isn't this the best rabbit? It looks just like Kagami, don't you think?"

The two security guards looked at each other and feared they knew what was going on. The second guard stepped forward and said, "Miss, was your friend involved in today's shooting at Ryoo High School?"

Konata nodded and her speech became more slurred and

hastened like a desperate person on the edge. "But don't worry. My Kagamin is one tough cookie and the doctors, paramedics, and even my cousin, a cop, said she was dead. They don't know what they're talking about, though. They don't know Kagami like I do. She would never die from something as pathetic as a gunshot."

The second security guard, who was a young man in his mid-twenties sighed and stepped forward while his partner, a much older man around Sojiro's age, stood back and watched. He placed his hands on Konata's shoulders and replied, "I'm so sorry everything had to happen to you today and believe it or not, I know how you feel. My girlfriend is also a student there and was wounded in the shooting. My sister also goes to that school. She's staying at this hospital so I can sympathize, but if all of those people and even your own family told you about your friend… then I'm afraid it must be true."

Suddenly, the unexpected happened. Konata dropped all of her presents for the late Kagami and snapped. She covered her ears with her hands and shook her head violently as she screamed. She didn't cry any words; just one long howl of anguish as she cried and it caught the attention of everyone in the area where the gift shop was. Konata tried to plow her way past the two guards but they were there to catch her as she continued to flail and kick in the air while finally screaming Kagami's name.

Fearing the blue-haired girl was a danger to either herself or the other people in the hospital, they tried to corral Konata towards the security office to calm down as she thrashed endlessly while others watched in shock and horror. They never saw somebody so upset over anyone and because of Konata's size, some thought she was a child screaming over the death of a family member.

"Izumi…!" A feminine voice cried from across the hall, suddenly silencing Konata and making her look for the source as the guards still held her by each of her arms.

Konata looked around and saw Ayano Minegishi sitting in a wheelchair with a large bandage similar to Sojiro's wrapped around her torso through her robe. She was being followed by a doctor who was monitoring her condition and improving motor

skills until she wheeled herself out towards the gift shop, where she saw Konata begin to throw her fit.

"Mine…Minegishi…you're alive…" Konata whispered and immediately calmed down.

The young security guard released Konata and approached Ayano in the wheelchair. "Do you know this girl, Ayano?"

Ayano's face puckered and she turned back to the security guard after looking at Konata. "Yes, Masato. She's…she's a friend."

The security guard nodded at Ayano, his girlfriend. He was Misao's brother. "Okay, then I'll leave her in your care."

As he turned away, he quickly stopped and bent down to Ayano's ear.

"Have…have you heard anything about…Misao yet?" He asked, this time revealing the voice of a scared young man searching for his sister, still completely oblivious to her fate. When he received news of the shooting, he wanted to run to Ryoo High School like the rest of the onlookers, but knew he was going to be needed at the hospital when the wounded started pouring in. When his girlfriend arrived at the hospital, he ideally assumed that Misao was okay too considering how close they were.

Ayano did her best to keep herself together after witnessing her friend be murdered and have her body drop on top of her, but this was for her boyfriend so she put on an act. "Not yet, Masato, but don't worry. This is Misa-chan we're talking about. You know your sister so I'm sure she's fine."

Normally, Ayano's boyfriend would've been able to see right through his girlfriend's act but his subconscious wanted him to see otherwise. He wanted to believe that his sister was still alive so he believed his girlfriend and allowed Ayano to take care of the crying Konata. Her boyfriend said his shift would end in a few hours and that he'd visit her again before he left them with his partner.

Konata slowly approached Ayano until the two stared at each other. Konata cleared her throat with a sniff and asked, "Misakichi…?"

Ayano quickly shifted her eyes to make sure her boyfriend left the area and when they were in the clear, she covered her face again and cried while shaking her head. Misao was dead and Ayano looked up with her teary expression. She wanted to ask but feared she already knew the answer to her question regarding Kagami's fate. Ayano didn't even have to ask when Konata also shook her head. The blue-haired girl was finally able to accept the fact that her best friend in Kagami Hiiragi was gone.

Ayano turned back to her doctor as he watched from a socially acceptable distance, who then stepped forward. The orange-haired girl said, "Doctor…would it be okay if I could talk to my… friend…for a second?"

The doctor nodded and wheeled Ayano to a waiting area in the hospital that had a better atmosphere. It was a relaxing area surrounded by a garden and a fish pond with a small waterfall, creating a harmonious sound and he left the two girls alone. Konata took a seat next to Ayano on a bench as she wiped her nose.

"I couldn't help but notice how you spoke of me. We haven't really talked before, have we?" Konata asked as she looked at the floor.

Ayano shook her head. "No…we haven't. I must also admit that this is a bit strange for me talking to you like this. I must admit, Konata-san, I don't know that much about you despite the fact that you and Hiiragi-chan seemed rather…close."

Konata nodded slightly, making another tear fall from her open eye. "I understand…but I guess that's how life works sometimes. You hang out with a certain friend all the time…but how often do you hang out with that certain friend's friend? I must admit it but I don't know that much about you either, Minegishi, aside

from the fact that you too were Kagami's friend."

"So we only have that in common so far." Konata added. "We were both Kagami's friends. I don't know exactly where we go from here."

Ayano shook her head. "Neither do I. However…I fear for the sovereignty of our group's future."

Konata turned her head to look at Ayano. "What are you talking about?"

"As far as I can tell…our group of friends all formed together into one ensemble and the way I see it…we're like a Jenga tower metaphorically speaking." Ayano replied.

The blue-haired girl shook her head. "I still don't get it."

"Each one of us is like a Jenga brick and the tower is like all of our friendships and our bonds to each other. Now I fear some of our tower's key pieces have been taken away and now we're an unstable structure. Will we all collapse and will all of our remaining friendships dissolve…or will we all band together and hold each other up through this tragedy?"

Konata looked away again. There was another pause until Konata lifted her hand and collected Ayano's hand and held it in hers, catching her by surprise. "I think I understand now. And I don't want any of us to drift apart. We've lost too many friends already. I want us to be friends now, Ayano Minegishi, and to keep the memory of Kagami and Misao alive through us. Kagami was my best friend and Misao was yours so now…we're friends."

The orange-haired girl tightened her grip around Konata's hand and gently patted it with her other. She let another tear slide down her cheek as the two girls nestled their heads against the other in continuous efforts to feel each other's comfort. Who would've thought that Konata Izumi and Ayano Minegishi would start to become better friends after this horrifying ordeal? However, Konata's earlier words were true. People usually

become close with a certain person, yet they unintentionally disregard their friend's friend. Those days were going to have to be over for this group of surviving girls if they wanted to make it out of this dark tunnel.

Neither Konata nor Ayano knew it, but the orange-haired girl's metaphor to the group being like a Jenga tower and each one playing a significant role like every brick in the tower was disturbingly accurate. The deaths of Kagami, Misao, Patty, and Minami all were going to have serious ramifications for the group. Kagami's death affected nearly everyone in Konata, Ayano, and especially Tsukasa. Minami's death was devastating to Yutaka and Miyuki, while Patty's death hit home with Hiyori and Konata. Misao's death of course shattered Ayano as they had known each other for years. The strongest bonds of the Ryoo High School girls had been destroyed so now what were they to do?

CHAPTER 15

As if their shattered minds were linked, Yutaka awoke from her slumber with a jolt and was covered in sweat and breathing hard. She heard countless screams as she slept and it was the pointblank bang of a gun firing that made her jump awake. She looked in every direction and she became scared when she didn't know where she was. It took several seconds for her to figure out that she was no longer at Konata's home but at her parent's home in her old bedroom. The memories suddenly returned and the mental video of watching Izumi Wakase put a gun to Minami Iwasaki's head and pull the trigger flashed before her eyes, making the salmon-haired girl grab her hair and scream loudly into her covers.

Her screams of despair were muffled by the bed sheets and blanket and she looked up again with crying eyes and tried to refill her depleted lungs by breathing deeply. Though she was relieved to be sitting in a room of silence isolated from any gunfire, screams, emergency vehicle sirens, or explosions, she was still alone. She felt open and vulnerable. This horrible feeling was created the second she saw Minami's body fall to the floor in Kuroi's classroom. The silent isolation also brought back

bad memories for her when she was still a child.

Yutaka listened closely and could hear the television on outside. No doubt her mother was still watching the news despite the fact that both her daughters were now safe. However, Yuki Kobayakawa shared something with the hundreds of other adults flocking to every surrounding hospital. They were all parents and they were all connected through their children. It was this buried bond that made her sit on the couch in front of the television in the living room while hugging a pillow and weeping silently as she watched the mobs of people still flock to the burning school or to the overcrowded hospitals. She felt all of their pain.

The salmon-haired girl crawled out of her bed and to her bedroom door. She put her ear to the door but still couldn't make out the words coming from the news broadcasts so she gently opened the door a crack and listened more closely.

"The numbers coming out of Ryoo High School and the surrounding hospitals continue to be devastating. The unofficial death toll at Ryoo High School now stands at seventy-two dead and over two hundred wounded. Rescuers have confirmed that most of the victims have died from the sudden blast from the improvised explosive device that detonated inside the school two hours ago rather than gunfire." A female reporter's voice said. "We also have confirmation that eight members of the Special Assault Team were also killed in the blast, including two pilots of one of their helicopters, which was brought down by the explosion. As you can see behind me, firefighters are still battling the blaze that has so far consumed more than half of the school and it is clear that the school is damaged beyond repair. Rescuers however are maintaining that there are students still trapped in the school but the fate of these missing students is still highly questionable."

Yutaka had heard enough and decided to make her presence known. She exited her room and walked down the short hallway and saw her mother curled on the couch with her eyes glued to the television. For some reason, her resentment grew and she frowned at the sight as she rounded the corner and her mother was alerted by her presence, making her reach for the remote control and mute the television.

"Yutaka, dear, are you okay?" Yuki asked and hugged her youngest daughter and followed it up with a quick examination over her short and frail body. She saw her daughter was okay though unresponsive to her loving touch, even her kiss on her forehead.

Yutaka sat next to her mother and nodded. "I'm fine, mom. I just…why are you watching this?"

Yuki turned back to the television and saw the image that made her cringe. The news camera viewing the schoolyard from a helicopter showed the horrific symbolic black bags filled with the bodies of deceased students sitting in rows as some paramedics began to pick them up and carry them away. Yuki quickly grabbed the remote and turned the television off and it somehow became quieter between them when the digital image went black.

"Are you okay, baby?" Yuki asked as she gently rubbed Yutaka's shoulder as she lowered her head.

Yutaka's eyes were red and puffy so Yuki knew her daughter was crying again and for understandable reasons. What was a mother to tell her daughter when she not only knew her best friend was dead, but she was also forced to watch her execution from start to finish? Yuki didn't know what to do because the worst experience of her life was when she divorced Yui and Yutaka's father nearly ten years ago. Splitting with her husband broke her heart, especially when she discovered that he had been cheating on her for more than a year with…of all people…Yuki's maid of honor at her own wedding. As devastating as that was, this didn't even compare to either the heart-break or the trauma Yutaka was forced to endure. Yuki felt so useless in comforting her youngest daughter.

"I'm…I'm scared, mom. It's all over…yet I'm so scared." Yutaka choked. "It's a horrible feeling…knowing that you should be dead but your best friend took the bullet for you. I saw that gun pointed right at my head but Minami…she…she…"

Yutaka's voice trailed off in another stuttering mess and she quickly covered her eyes, prompting Yuki to nestle closer to her daughter. She easily scooped her up and hugged her tightly in her lap. "I know, I know, Yutaka. What happened to you today… it was nothing short of monstrous. You didn't deserve any of that and neither did Minami…but she saved your life and I'd be willing to bet that if she could, she would do it all over again."

Yutaka buried her face in the sanctuary of her mother's shoulder. The tears leaking from her eyes were absorbed by her mother's shirt and Yuki pulled her daughter in closer. The salmon-haired girl continued to cry silently with the occasional hiccup gasping for fresh air only to vent it out again in anguish.

"But…but I would've done the same thing for her, too…!" Yutaka cried with her face still buried in her mother's shoulder.

Yuki gulped bluntly and shivered at the words her daughter spoke. She shuddered in fear because of not only was the image of Yutaka sacrificing herself for Minami so gruesome, Yuki knew her daughter was speaking the truth when she said it. Yutaka would throw her life into the path of the oncoming bullet without a second thought or care if it meant that it would've been Minami that walked out of that school before the bomb went off. Everything about today was a lose-lose situation for everybody involved. Everybody lost someone they cared about, yet they desired to do it all over again so they could sacrifice themselves to save the ones they lost. Something special existed between this specific group of girls that once attended the former Ryoo High School.

The chimes of their doorbell made Yuki look up, but it made Yutaka jump and yelp in post-traumatic fear from the surprise noise. When Yutaka jumped, she cried louder and continued to tremble as Yuki whispered comforting things her daughter and that she would be right back. Yutaka slid off her mother's lap and allowed Yuki to answer the door as the salmon-haired girl continued to listen.

"Um…may I help you?" Yuki's curious voice asked the strangers at the front door, making Yutaka look up.

"We're so sorry for showing up unannounced like this, but my name is Miyuki Takara and this is my mother. I'm friends with your daughter, Yutaka…and I was also friends with…Minami." Miyuki's sweet voice sounded in the hall, making Yutaka turn her head towards the hallway.

"Oh, I see. Well then please, come in." Yuki said with remorse in her voice.

Yutaka kept looking at the empty hallway until the pink-haired girl rounded the corner and stared at the salmon-haired girl with a sad face while carrying a shoulder bag. To Miyuki's surprise, Yutaka simply looked away with a placid stare. This still didn't stop the always kind-hearted Miyuki from maneuvering around the couch and sitting down next to Yutaka as the two mothers in the background gave them privacy. Miyuki rested her shoulder bag on the floor at her feet and silence fell between them. Yutaka was expecting to be comforted by Miyuki but she too was surprised when she glanced over and saw the pink-haired girl simply standing next to her while twiddling her thumbs.

"I thought you were going to hug me or tell me that you were sorry we went through that or even tell me everything was going to be okay." Yutaka stated, trying to remain tough.

Her toughness was challenged and defeated when she saw Miyuki drip water from her eyes and sniff loudly while cringing. "To be honest…I was hoping you would do the same for me."

Yutaka gasped lightly at seeing Miyuki in such a broken mess.

"I…I just wanted to tell you how much I understand your pain. I was there with you…and I saw what happened to Minami." Miyuki uttered, making Yutaka quickly turn her head again and face away. "I always knew how much she meant to you and we all know why and we've all seen how much you two enjoyed each other's company…but you don't know much about Mi-chan and I. Our history."

Yutaka slowly looked up but kept her head facing away from Miyuki.

"I don't think we've ever been able to truly establish a formal friendship, Yutaka-chan. However, we must credit that to our different classes in school and ages so I feel there are some things about me you should know or else you won't understand how deeply I feel about Minami." Miyuki began to reveal herself to Yutaka and the salmon-haired girl listened with immense but still hidden intrigue.

It may have been true that Miyuki and Yutaka weren't the best of friends but Yutaka still knew of Miyuki's social status and that she came from a near-perfect background…or so she thought. The prestigious pink-haired girl was awed by everyone at Ryoo High School and it made Yutaka's heart pound with secret anticipation as she thought of the idea of someone like Miyuki Takara having skeletons in her closet. As far as Yutaka knew, she was going to be the first one who ever heard of Miyuki's troubled background…and she was right.

"I'm a child of divorce." Miyuki whispered, instantly driving a spike into a soft spot for Yutaka and she tried to hold in her gasp as Miyuki continued. "My parents' marriage was a sham from the beginning…because it was an arranged marriage. My grandparents on both of my parents' sides were…well…they were financially secured to say the least. And they wanted a merger of our families to continue a vast influx of revenue…so one family put forth their son…and the other put forth their daughter…my parents. They tried to make it work…but you cannot force love onto anyone. They divorced when I was about ten. Most of my memories of them though were of them fighting and shouting all the time. There were times when I would cry myself to sleep at night…but I had one friend during those times that was like my little sister."

Yutaka's interest grew and for the first time she slowly turned her head to glance at Miyuki, who was still staring at the floor with teary eyes. Yutaka turned away again as Miyuki continued.

"Minami and her family moved in shortly before the worst of my parents' fighting began and we were instantly connected. Even back then she never liked to talk that much, but she always somehow knew how I felt. Her father is a businessman that

always has to travel for his work, which caused a lot of fights between him and Minami's mother." Miyuki continued. "Her parents bought her these two walkie-talkie toys for her birthday one year and she gave one to me. I can't even begin to tell you how many nights we stayed up late talking to each other over those walkie-talkies. I always called her the most though and only when my parents fought and she would always reassure me that it would get better…even if my parents did divorce. Those were the nights when Minami would speak the most; when we were each hiding under our covers and talking over our walkie-talkies. She was always there for me in her comforting ways that regrettably not many people were blessed to see…but you were one of the few. I'm sure you think I'm this perfect superwoman that graces the halls of Ryoo High School and that everything in my life and about me is flawless…but Yutaka-chan…it's not. At least not anymore. It was only flawless and perfect…when Minami was there."

For the first time since Miyuki turned her secluded life story into an open book, Yutaka slowly turned her body around and faced the pink-haired girl. It shocked Miyuki to see the always sweet and delicate Yutaka glaring at her with such judgmental and even angry eyes.

"Why are you telling me all of this?" She suddenly snapped.

Confused by the harsh tone, Miyuki tilted her head. "Be…because Minami was your friend too and I just wanted you to know that she affected more lives than just yours for the better."

"I already know that!" Yutaka suddenly turned and yelled, making Miyuki jump. "My parents are divorced too and I can't even begin to tell you how many times I needed a friend like Minami by my side but I didn't! Despite what my big sister said about why she decided to be a cop, she only wanted a job that would keep her away from our home when my parents started fighting after my mom discovered my dad was sleeping around! It was only me curled in a corner of my bedroom and crying at night like you but guess who was there for me! Nobody! Minami was the only true friend I ever had and now she's gone! Now I feel like I was thrown back into that isolated loneliness I always felt! You think you're suffering, Miyuki?! At least you had other

friends! I was all alone and now I…I…"

Yutaka's frail body couldn't take the endless stress of the day she was forced to push through and she covered her face and cried. As she cried loudly in a hysterical mess, Miyuki scooted closer to Yutaka and hugged her tightly. She allowed Yutaka to express her endless shades of distraught while she ran her hand across her head through her hair. Miyuki let tears of her own drip until she vocalized something that began to calm Yutaka.

"That's no longer going to be the case, Yutaka-chan, because I'm here for you. You and I are going to be best friends now and I'll make sure you never feel another lonely day again…because I have something for you." Miyuki whispered and disconnected her hug.

The pink-haired girl turned and reached down into her shoulder bag resting on the floor and grabbed two items. Yutaka stared and her lips quivered when she watched Miyuki lift two walkie-talkies out of the bag and placed one of them in her small, petite hand. Miyuki didn't have to explain what these two devices were or their significance as she looked back up at Miyuki, her lips still trembling. No doubt these were the same walkie-talkies that Minami and Miyuki used as kids as their age showed.

"From now on, whenever you need to talk…or if I need to talk… we both know how to reach each other." Miyuki sniffed in the middle of her sentence as she knew she would more than likely be the one who would reach out to Yutaka the most.

Yutaka quickly wrapped her arms around Miyuki again and continued her emotional venting.

(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)

"And you say she was talking to the pillow as well?" Miki asked with deep concern as she sat at the family dinner table with her husband sitting next to her and looking at Inori and Matsuri sitting across from her.

Inori nodded while trying her best to keep herself calm and another crying episode at bay. "I'm scared, mom. You should've seen the look in her eyes. Kagami died only a few hours ago and she's already convinced herself that she's still here in another form. I read about this kind of thing in PTSD in my psychology major in school. These kinds of symptoms usually take months to appear but for it to happen right now…this is horrifying. I think we should intervene now or we might regret it."

Miki and Tadao looked at each other quickly and rose to their feet. Inori and Matsuri led the way up the stairs again, all of them remaining silent as they trekked upward towards Kagami's room. The Hiiragi mother could already feel the tears beginning to form inside her eyes as they approached her late daughter's bedroom door and they saw it was still open a crack, just as Inori left it. The tension and heartbreak was thick in the family, all the while Matsuri was still debating when the best time would be to tell her family about her pregnancy.

Inori took the lead and knocked on the door again and whispered, "Tsukasa, can we talk to you?"

The oldest Hiiragi daughter didn't wait for a response and pushed the door open. It was suddenly made clear that it wasn't a moment too soon when the Hiiragi family entered Kagami's room and saw Tsukasa. The scene before them was so terrifying that it took a second to even comprehend it until they had to conclude what they were seeing wasn't a dream or even a hallucination.

They entered just in time to see Tsukasa sitting on Kagami's bed and ready to cut at her right wrist with a pair of scissors from her late sister's desk. The youngest Hiiragi looked up quickly as her family was still processing the image with a tear-riddled face and proclaimed, "It's clear to me now! I have to die!"

"No Tsukasa!" Matsuri screamed and acting out of both sisterly and a newfound protective instinct, leaped forward and tackled her younger sister, sending them both to the floor and making Tsukasa and Matsuri fall on top of each other. Miki screamed in horror as did Inori as Tadao ran forward and took the instrument away as Tsukasa continued to cry on the floor.

"Tsukasa, why?! Why would you even think of doing something so horrible?! We already lost Kagami today!" Matsuri screamed as she held herself on top of Tsukasa. "Explain yourself now!"

Tsukasa stared blankly at her sister's ceiling as more water flowed out of her eyes. "Wak…Wakase-san. She said that…I must die…and sis would be spared…"

Everyone in her family became more entrenched in her disturbing words as Miki bent down to Tsukasa with a crying face of her own and rested her hand on her daughter's cheek. "Wakase…the shooter?"

Tsukasa nodded, still with a blank face. "She…she ambushed us. She held us captive in our classroom. She…she hated Kagami… and wanted her to suffer. The only way she could see that…was to kill me…and let sis live with the guilt. But if I kill myself, it'll all be okay and sis will be fine!"

"Tsukasa you're talking crazy!" Tadao exclaimed as he took his youngest daughter's hand. "Kagami is…Kagami is…gone, Tsukasa. She's gone…and what you were about to do would've only made you gone also. And you're telling us that you were… trapped with that shooter?"

Tsukasa nodded weakly with Matsuri still firmly planted on top of her. "She told me that if I died, sis would be allowed to live. I have to die…for Kagami."

"Tsukasa, Kagami is already dead!" Inori screamed, her stress reaching higher proportions by this point. "Stop talking like this, you're scaring all of us!"

"But…but sis is still here. She's sitting on her bed right now. Can't you hear her talking to us right now?" Tsukasa whimpered, still keeping her eyes fixated upward.

The Hiiragi family turned to the bed and only saw the crumpled pillow that Kagami once rested her head on every night. Inori's speculations of Tsukasa being in serious trouble was

unfortunately beginning to take shape for them as they all turned their heads back to the broken Hiiragi daughter.

Miki took Tsukasa's hand and rubbed it gently while still crying. "What is she saying, Tsukasa?"

Tsukasa continued to keep her focus upward as Matsuri still rested on top of her. She sniffed again and replied, "She just told me that I still need to make dinner for everyone tonight…and to make it extra special for everyone…and for her."

Miki lowered her head and rested it on her youngest daughter's hand and sobbed. Tadao looked away in everlasting agony while Inori hugged him. After the initial scare over Tsukasa's planned actions against herself, silence fell onto Kagami Hiiragi's room once again and the whole family was as quiet as her room was ever since she left it forever this morning.

CHAPTER 16

"So you're telling me that…there wasn't anything else you could do?" The blue-haired girl in Konata Izumi asked as she looked downward as the surgeon who worked on Hiyori Tamura stood before her and gave his final prognosis.

"I'm afraid so, Izumi." The doctor replied. "When she was shot, the bullet traveled through her body and it was stopped by her thoracic vertebrae. She's going to be paralyzed from the waist down and confined to a wheelchair indefinitely."

Konata gulped and winced at the news. To think that one of her friends was never going to walk again after she had sacrificed and risked so much to ensure the safety of her cousin. Konata also knew that Yutaka wasn't going to take the news well either. Who knows how differently things would've turned out if the salmon-haired girl had stayed outside when she made it to safety initially? Regardless, Konata put such worthless ideas out of her head and looked back up at the doctor.

"Is…is she awake now?" She asked.

The doctor nodded. "Yes, she's awake and fully aware of what has happened to her. She knows that she's paralyzed and I think she could really use a friend right now."

Konata nodded. "Take me to her."

Leading the way through the chaotic hospital, Konata kept close to the white-coated man. The hospital was an endless display of pain and suffering and it only made it worse for Konata when she saw most of the victims either in the rooms or resting on the floors in the hallway were all wearing the same blue and white patterned school uniform she was. She knew she would never be able to see her Ryoo High School summer uniform the same way ever again with the endless shades of red on the blue and white tops or blue skirts. The rooms were still overcrowded and students with less serious injuries were forced to either wait in the waiting rooms or make the best with the bandages and slings they were given until more help arrived. Konata kept trying to remind herself how lucky Hiyori was that she was still alive and was going to pull through, but at the same time couldn't help but wonder at what expense.

The doctor finally stopped at a room and allowed her to enter on her own. Konata slowly walked into the room as the doctor walked away to give them privacy and when he disappeared, Konata began to have second thoughts. What words of comfort could she possibly give to Hiyori that would make her feel better at this point? She was never going to walk again and no doubt she was going to need special accommodations for the rest of her life. Still, she continued to walk forward.

The room she was in was a double so there was another victim of the shooting in with her and Hiyori's bed was the furthest away at the window. Konata made the mistake of glancing to her right and saw the sleeping victim on the bed and the nature of his injury. Izumi Wakase shot him and the bullet struck his lower jawbone, practically tearing it completely off and he only had half of the structure left attached to his head. Konata quickly gulped and looked away and took another step forward and saw Hiyori resting in her bed and wearing the hospital's standard robe for all the patients.

She was awake and was staring out her window at the day outside. It was still as picturesque and beautiful as when it first began going on nearly twelve hours ago. The look on her face immediately disturbed Konata. Hiyori's face showed the absence of any hope or life at all. It was one of the same looks that Izumi Wakase herself started giving the world in the weeks leading up to the shooting. The gaze was that of a person who had truly lost all hope and even the will to live.

Konata walked forward again and slowly pulled a chair next to Hiyori's bed and sat down. Hiyori however continued to stare at the warm and sunny day just outside her window. The blue-haired girl desperately wanted to say something that would make her friend smile, but she was coming up empty. Even though Konata was able to escape the school shooting without injury, she could feel Hiyori's pain and could now fully appreciate the little things in life, like walking. Seeing something that everybody takes for granted like walking be so easily taken away with the pull of a trigger gave Konata a fresh perspective on her life.

"How are you feeling, Hiyorin?" Konata forced herself to ask after letting too much time pass.

Silence was Hiyori's only response as she continued to look out the window.

"The doctor told me that you're going to pull through so congratulations." Konata added to try and keep the awkward silence at bay.

Hiyori however wouldn't follow Konata's lead and continued to remain hushed, making her blue-haired friend feel ever more uncomfortable. Konata was keeping her eyes focused downward until curiosity got the better of her and she slowly raised them up and looked at Hiyori. Her face still showed complete absence of life and her eyes were void of any hope through her spare pair of glasses.

Konata sighed lightly. "You know, you can always count on me to be here for you. I think I'll be spending a lot of time here from now on. My dad is in a coma and I'll do whatever it takes to make your life as easy as possible and don't forget—"

"They found them." Hiyori suddenly spoke.

"Found who?"

"Patty-chan and Wakase." Hiyori replied softly, still looking out the window. "They found their bodies."

Konata felt a cold shiver run down her spine. Not knowing how to respond to such an obscure response, Konata could only answer, "Yeah…"

"Konata…why did this happen to us?" The long-haired girl asked, still with no life essence in her voice.

The blue-haired girl lowered her head as her depression deepened. "I wish I knew. We were all…so happy. But…but how did we miss this? How did we miss Wakase like this?"

"I knew something was wrong with her. I've known for weeks…I just couldn't make the connections or even wrap my mind around something this horrible." Hiyori whispered. "But I still don't understand. Why did she kill Patty-chan and shoot me? We were friends. I made effort after effort in the weeks before this to get

her to open up to me. She knew we were all friends."

Konata's depression was so deep she wanted to cry again but her body was completely deprived of tears at this point. All she could do was sigh again and give her only response. "I wish I knew. Is it possible that The Hunt Club completely took away her humanity to the point where she didn't recognize any of us anymore? Did she want to forget about the trauma so much that she just wanted to fry her own memories? I remember that club… and the darkness it puts into your soul."

Another long silence fell between Hiyori and Konata.

"Does this darkness have a name? This cruelty…this hatred…how did it find us? Did it sneak into Wakase's mind or did she fully embrace it as her only escape?" Hiyori asked, still looking out the window. "What has happened to us? What has happened to all of us? This world we now live in…these changing times and constant uncertainties. What will it be like for the kids we bring into this world? When we watch them go to school as our parents did this morning for us, will we be clinging to each other in tears, as if we're sending our children to fight in some war across distant lands only to hope for their safe return at the end of the day but knowing some will be lost along the way? When did we lose our way, Konata? Does this darkness have a name? Is it our names? Is it our generation? Did we do this to each other?"

Konata lowered her head again and was able to find a few tears to shed from her eyes. Hearing the tone of Hiyori's voice confirmed for her that she was no longer speaking to the kind and often eccentric girl that was once her friend. Konata feared that Hiyori was consumed by a darkness of her own that she would never escape because she would be reminded of it every day when she would wake up and be forced to crawl into a wheelchair.

The blue-haired girl reached out and grasped her friend's hand as it rested on the bed. "Is there anything I can do for you or get you?"

Hiyori's eyes suddenly shifted to the window's lock. "Could you

open my window and let me feel some breeze? I can't feel my legs…so please let me feel at least that. I need to keep seeing and feeling how beautiful my life is."

Konata nodded slightly and rose from her chair. She walked over to the large window, unlocked it, and pushed it open. The warm sunrays heated the room but a cool breath of sweet springtime air gently blew into the room and played with Konata's long blue hair and she looked at the picturesque landscape in front of her. It was hard for her to still accept the fact that in the midst of this beautiful day, her older cousin was in the middle of the scene of her burning high school helping direct emergency vehicles to either extinguish the mountainous flames or let ambulances carry victims to more hospitals. All she could hear was the sounds of the wind blowing from the fifth floor of the hospital and birds chirping happily in trees.

She turned back to Hiyori. "Is that better?"

Hiyori's face still showed that of a person who had lost all hope and was now a blank disc. Even her vocal response lacked vibrancy when she responded, "I don't know. We'll see eventually."

Konata slowly nodded and came back to her side and sat down again. "Patty-chan…she was a great friend. I really admired her for coming all this way to Japan from her home in America for the love of what we consider our lifestyle. But it had to end like this."

Hiyori slowly nodded as she continued to eye the window and feel the ticklish breeze blow on her face. "Konata…are we ever going to get out of here?"

"Out of where?"

"This persecution. This whole thing of simply walking down the street every day and people looking at us differently because of our interests. Will the day ever come where we'll be able to live in peace…or are we doomed to forever be pushed around until we all go the way of Izumi Wakase?" Hiyori asked and for the

first time, began to develop an emotional constraint in her throat and her eyes showed signs of deepening moisture.

Konata looked down again. "I've often asked myself that as well, but I never let it bother me. I am who I am. You are who you are. But to answer your question…the only thing I can say is I don't know. I can only imagine that there will be people no matter where we go who give us those looks and talk about us behind our back…but we need to surround ourselves with the ones who truly accept us for who we are."

"Like Kagami?"

Hearing the name tore Konata's heart right down the middle. Konata quickly covered her face and wept silently over the death of her best friend. With the horrific silence returning to Hiyori's room, the only sound that kept it away was the incessant whimpering of Konata's broken emotions. She was never broken down this badly before and Hiyori slowly shifted her eyes away from the window and looked at her. Konata was seen as the unofficial leader of the otaku branch of their friends and now she sat in a crying mess over Kagami's death. Seeing the once strong Konata Izumi reduced to such a state made Hiyori look away again and if it was somehow possible, a little more optimism and hope for the future died in her eyes.

"…Yes, Hiyorin…people like…Kagami." Konata whispered through her covering hands.

(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)

Still struggling to bring their youngest family member back down to Earth, the Hiiragi's continued to hold Tsukasa on the floor inside Kagami's room. The youngest Hiiragi twin wasn't struggling or trying to reach for the scissors or anything else that could be used as a weapon, but she still continued to chip away at her family's patience and peace of mind with how she continued to talk. It was killing them on the inside to hear Tsukasa speak of herself so vilely and that she must die.

"But if I die, sis will come back. She told me that herself before

you came in and stopped me." Tsukasa said in a voice that resembled Hiyori's in the fact that it had no life essence or hope in it.

"Tsukasa that's not Kagami! That's a pillow now stop this right now!" Inori pleaded as she also began to reach her breaking point while still thinking about the scene earlier where she held her dead sister in her arms at the school.

"She's still speaking to me. She needs me to die so she can come back. I must listen to Wakase-san…"

"Stop it Tsukasa!" Inori yelled again.

"I love sis so much that I would shed my blood for her…"

"Tadao, call a doctor!" Miki wailed.

"Don't you want sis to come back, mom? She says she loves you…"

"I'm warning you, Tsukasa!" Matsuri yelled and readied herself to do something drastic.

"It doesn't have to be so bloody. I can tie a rope around my neck and jump from a tree…."

Suddenly, Matsuri flattened her palm and slapped Tsukasa across the face, making it echo in the room and silencing everybody. The rash movement created a glowing red mark on Tsukasa's face and she looked away as her eyes continued to leak. She readied herself to speak and everyone leaned in closer in anticipation.

"I don't want it to hurt so much. When I die…please make it quick…"

"Goddamn it, Tsukasa! I'm not going to let you kill yourself because even if you succeed, it won't bring Kagami back! Nothing will! She's dead! We all held her in our arms at the school,

including you! Nothing you say, do, or threaten will bring her back! You can even run for political office one day and even ban guns everywhere in Japan but guess what, it still won't bring her back!" Matsuri had reached her breaking point. "And if you kill yourself, how am I going to explain to my baby that it only has one aunt to spoil and love it?!"

Dead silence fell upon Kagami's room and all eyes suddenly shifted from Tsukasa to Matsuri, each eye expressing a profound look of shock. Tsukasa blinked rapidly several times and slowly looked back up at her older sister who held her eyes shut until the full discourse of what she vocalized hit home. Matsuri snapped her eyes open and now showed a look of distress and she knew she was under the spotlight now.

"...Ma...Matsuri..." Tsukasa whispered with a newfound sense of emotion in her voice and her eyes drifted lower towards her older sister's stomach.

"Wh...what was that, dear?" Miki asked after stuttering and unable to process what her middle child just screamed.

Matsuri still held her distressed gaze and she slowly backed off Tsukasa and sat on her knees. She glanced around and saw everyone staring at her. Inori was in disbelief and her parents showed looks of concern and shock with even a hint of brewing anger. Tsukasa however slowly used her arms to sit herself up and she still looked at Matsuri with eyes that had a rising glow in them.

Matsuri gulped, sighed, and came clean. "Everybody...I'm pregnant."

Inori's and Miki's movements were synchronized and they cupped their mouths together. Tadao on the other hand had a reaction that was more comprehensive of confusion, stress, fright, and anger. He lost one of his youngest daughters this morning and now he finds out only a few hours later that another one is pregnant. Neither he nor his wife knew their daughter had a boyfriend let alone being sexually active.

"Is…is this a joke, Matsuri?" Tadao asked, his voice ripe with stern strength and it made Matsuri wince.

Matsuri cleared her throat and turned to everyone. She slowly nodded as now her eyes flooded with tears when she replied, "No, dad. It's not a joke. I…I have a boyfriend and…this happened."

Tadao quickly ran his hand through his hair and sighed with exhausted anguish. He held his head in pain from a newfound headache and stuttered several times before he could finally vocalize a sentence. "Who…who is this guy?"

Matsuri was reluctant to tell. Not because he was somebody the family knew, but because of what we was. "His…his name is… Lance Bronson."

Tadao looked up. "That…that doesn't sound like a traditional Japanese name."

She nodded. "He's…he's an English teacher…from America."

The rest of the women remained silent while they watched Tadao become more impatient. "A teacher? How old is he?"

"Twenty-six years old." Matsuri quickly replied.

The five year age difference wasn't as bad as the Hiiragi family was expecting when Matsuri said her boyfriend was a teacher. It also wasn't the fact that Matsuri's boyfriend was American either, but he was upset more so that his daughter was having obviously having sex out of marriage and she was still in college.

"What did he say when you told him?" Tadao continued his interrogation of his middle child.

Matsuri's silence and dismissive body language told her family an answer they were dreading.

"You haven't told him yet?!" Miki finally exclaimed.

"Well when you do I guarantee you he'll be on the first plane back to America." Tadao sighed with disappointment.

"Lance isn't like that!" Matsuri yelled, once again catching her family by surprise. "He's a gentleman and he loves me! He treats me like a goddess and is always there for me! We've been dating for six months and I would've known by now if he would be the type of guy who would plant it and run! Whenever we're together we might as well be the only people in the world and nothing else matters!"

Seeing the firm and passionate response coming out of Matsuri, Miki and Tadao felt a little bit better about this situation but there was still another pressing matter before them. Miki took the initiative and held Matsuri's hand.

"Okay, Matsuri. You're obviously old enough to consent to an adult relationship so you should also be mature enough to make serious adult decisions like this one." Miki said firmly though still reassuring. "What is your plan now?"

Matsuri suddenly felt another human grab her free hand and she looked at the source. To her surprise and growing happiness, Tsukasa gripped her hand and held it with her dearly missed loving face. She massaged her sister's hand and couldn't help but stare at Matsuri's still flat stomach as the pregnancy was still in the beginning process.

"Matsuri…please have this baby and keep it. I…I don't know how to explain it but I…I feel…a little bit better." Tsukasa said with tears in her eyes but the tone of her voice told the family she was speaking the truth. "Kagami, she…she may be…gone…but this baby is…it's a beautiful thing. It's a fresh start…a new chance to start over. A new life in our family. I want to be an aunt…and I want to spoil and love your child."

Hearing and seeing Tsukasa return to normal self despite the traumatic and unprecedented horrors she was forced to endure all day today brought Matsuri to tears. She quickly wrapped her

arms around Tsukasa and pulled her tight. All of Matsuri's earlier fears were proven unjustified when she dreaded telling her family that she was going to be a young mother. The day that turned out to be the worst day in the Hiiragi family's history was beginning to show a slight silver lining in it. Tsukasa was back to her normal self as a new life was going to bless and grace the Hiiragi family. Inori and Miki hugged Matsuri and Tsukasa while Tadao couldn't help but smile himself and he hugged his family.

(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)

As Ayano Minegishi continued to sit in her wheelchair in the tranquility of the hospital's waterfall and small fishpond, her new friend in Konata Izumi returned to her side with two drinks and immediately gave one to Ayano, who gratefully took it and began to drink through the straw.

"Thank you so much, Konata-san." Ayano said.

It was seeing her smile that gave the blue-haired girl a warming feeling in her body, opposite of what she felt when she went to see Hiyori Tamura. Konata grinned back and replied, "You can call me Kona-chan. Kagami's sister always does."

Ayano was flattered and uncomfortable at the same time with such close honorifics being plopped onto her lap after only an hour of bonding with Konata but she still took it with grace. She cleared her throat and asked, "How is Tamura-san doing?"

She instantly regretted asking the question when she read Konata's facial features as easily as a stop sign. Konata's happy face was wiped clean and it melted into a sad and depressed billboard of heartache. The blue-haired girl gulped and she slowly shook her head while taking a quick sip of her drink.

"She's not doing so well." Konata replied when she finished her intake. "She was shot by her own friend and this same friend murdered another one of her friends. She's really confused right now and scared. I think that she's afraid of facing the rest of the world now after what happened to Izumi Wakase."

Ayano cringed upon hearing the name. It unsettled Ayano to know that her new best friend was also friends at one time that not only held a gun to her head, but also shot Misao Kusakabe execution style right in front of her. Still, Ayano knew there were two sides to every story and knew that Wakase didn't wake up this morning and decide to carry out the worst school shooting in history. There had to be reasons behind it.

"Do you have any idea why she did what she did today?" Ayano asked.

Konata nodded slowly. "Let's just say that everyone has their breaking point. When people break…it's an ugly thing to watch and Hiyorin unfortunately had to observe it from beginning to end and she nearly became another fatality because of it. She's hurting real bad now and she doesn't know what to do. One of her best friends tried to kill her and Patty-chan was also killed by Wakase so Hiyorin is very scared right now."

"And what about you, Kona-chan?" Ayano began to break through her barriers and become closer to Konata.

"What about me?"

"Wakase was your friend too, wasn't she? How do you feel about all of this? Don't forget, she also took away a friend we both loved and cherished." Ayano's voice dropped hints of hate towards the end.

Konata looked away and sighed. "I don't know. Kagami was my best friend…but I can't help but feel that I let Wakase down. Today could've been prevented if we all acted on our first instincts, but we thought that we had to protect each other from The Hunt Club."

"The what?"

Konata sighed again. "It's nothing. It's just the end product of why there is so much suffering in this world."

Silence fell between them. Though the two girls wouldn't admit it, this was a rather unique and unconventional alliance they were forming with each other, yet at the same time it made perfect sense. Konata's best friend was Kagami and Ayano's best friend was Misao. Kagami and Misao were both killed in the shooting, leaving Konata and Ayano in the open with nobody to call their best friend. However, because Kagami and Misao had a preexisting friendship, it led to Konata and Ayano being able to bridge the gap with each other and now they wanted to rebuild themselves. Rebuild their Jenga tower as Ayano put it.

As the two friends continued to keep the awkward but still somehow paradoxically comfortable silence between them, the slowing activity in the main lobby nearby suddenly became more erratic and chaotic. Nurses began running out the front doors, catching Ayano's and Konata's attention and they decided to investigate. They walked into the lobby where doctors also began rushing out the front door as cries for help from onlookers on the street began to echo their horror.

The young security guard that identified himself as Masato Kusakabe and Ayano's boyfriend slowly walked back from outside after he surveyed the crisis outside. His face was pale and he was shaking his head with deep remorse until he spotted his girlfriend and walked over to her and Konata.

"Masato…what's going on?" Ayano asked.

Masato sighed. "One of the hospital's patients jumped from her fifth floor window. She's dead. To think…she had survived the school shooting and survived the surgery she came out of a little bit ago."

Konata's heart leaped into her throat and she stuttered as she asked for her name.

"Uh…I couldn't see the first name on the hospital band on her wrist because of the blood but the last name was Tamura." He replied.

CHAPTER 17

Yui Narumi blew her whistle loudly to halt one fire truck to allow an ambulance to pass by at the disaster zone at Ryoo High School. The ambulance was carrying more of the latest victims pulled out of the burning wreckage of the school and when it got out of the crime scene, Yui blew her whistle again and allowed the fire truck to keep coming forward. The red truck rolled past her bringing more firefighters and equipment to fight the still raging inferno destroying the school.

She turned back towards the school and stood before the infinite carnage. Cars were still overturned by the blast of the explosion and the firefighters finally managed to extinguish the last of the flames burning the crashed SAT Black Hawk helicopter. Most of the fires in the surrounding buildings were also nearly out but the school continued to prove to be a difficult task. The natural gas lines that supplied the school with warm temperatures were still spewing the gas, thus allowing the flames to keep burning.

Yui shook her head and wiped the sweat off her forehead with her hand as the day's stress for her continued relentlessly despite the fact that her sister and cousin were safe. It so easily could've been her sister or cousin that died in that school, especially after hearing of the testimony that Yutaka gave of being held hostage by Izumi Wakase. Yui tried to keep herself together, even as she stood and thought about Minami Iwasaki and how Yutaka was forced to watch her execution from start to finish. She wondered if her little sister would ever be the same after witnessing something so horrible to not only another person, but also her best friend.

Feeling parched from a combination of the spring's warm day and the endless stress, her eyes flooded with relief when she saw a fellow officer bring a bottle of cold water to her and was carrying a schoolbag. She took the water, thanked him sincerely, and downed half the bottle in two gulps, making her feel much better.

"Found this in one of the hallways. It was only a few feet away from another body." The male officer said and held it up to Yui.

Yui took the bag and examined it. It had a few blood stain spots on it and was burned at one corner by the fire while one of the buckles was also broken by the sporadic activity. However, it wasn't the blood or the burn that broke Yui's heart. It was when she saw a keychain of the anime character Kagome from InuYasha dangling from the carrying strap. She shook her head with a look of anguish while sighing.

"Goddamn…I still remember when I was carrying one of these things to and from school every day." Yui remembered. "I even had a keychain of my own. When I was still in school, Gundam was the huge thing and I remember having a keychain of one of the characters on my bag."

Her fellow officer nodded. "My son also has one of those things on his cell phone. It's a charm that his girlfriend made for him."

Yui shook her head again and turned back to the school while lowering the schoolbag. "We never had to worry about shit like this when we were in school. The very idea of it didn't even exist in anyone's minds. Now we're cleaning up an SAT helicopter on the street while pulling dead students out of a burning high school."

Her fellow officer joined her in shaking his head at the horrid thought. "This isn't fair. This isn't right. As a parent myself I always told my son that he could achieve anything if he put his mind to it…but now I have to tell him to stay alert and stay alive in addition to I love you. No parent should be forced to say that to their child."

Yui slowly nodded while still watching the firefighters several yards in front of her douse the high flames eating the school. Though she wasn't a mother, she still desired to be one but at the right conditions with her husband's seemingly malicious work schedule always interfering. However, it was events like this that always made her think twice. She knew that she would never be able to protect her child one hundred percent of the time and knew the psychology behind the guilt most parents of the dead were feeling now. To feel the guilt of not being able to swoop in and save your child or even take the bullets for them was something Yui didn't want any part of. One of the worst parts

was the fact that the parents felt this guilt despite the absence of any wrongdoing. How could anyone get over the fact that they were feeling endless guilt, torment, and heartache because they told their kids to have a nice day at school?

"So how's your sister taking everything?" He asked her.

Yui shrugged and sighed simultaneously. "It's still too early to tell…but I'm still not ruling out therapy at this point. There's bound to be serious mental ramifications after what she was forced to go through. My cousin too. I mean, her father is in a coma and two of her best friends are dead, one of which was the shooter. How do you recover from that?"

Once again, her fellow officer's only logical retort was to shake his head with disbelief and at a loss for words.

"No matter what happens to my uncle, my cousin will be taken care of. I'll make sure of it, whether she goes and lives with my mother and Yutaka or if she moves in with me and my husband." Yui's tone convinced anyone listening that she wasn't bluffing or taking this lightly.

Her fellow officer could see that behind her tough and stern voice of confidence, a scared and lonely person was the one behind the mask of strength. He decided to redirect the conversation to a more business related topic so Yui's head would still be in the game.

"So how long do you think they're gonna spend cleaning this mess up?" He asked as he turned back to the school. "Better yet, how long do you think we'll be here. This has overtime written all over it."

Yui once again shook her head. "I'm trying not to think about that either. Yutaka and I have been separated enough for a lifetime already and I know my mother is doing the best that she can, but…I worry about her too sometimes. The anniversary of my parents' divorce is coming up and she always gets depressed around this time."

Despite his best efforts, her fellow officer couldn't seem to keep Yui's mind off her family, which he also couldn't help but admire given the circumstances. "I'm sorry for bringing it up."

"It's fine." She quickly replied, expecting the regretful answer from him. "My dad was an asshole for cheating with my mother's best friend so he might as well be dead to me. It's Yutaka that always lifted me up because I had to play the duo role as mother and sister. I know that my cousin felt the exact same way when she was trapped inside this school with her. She needed to play the mother and the sister role."

"That's quite a bond you ladies share." The fellow officer observed.

For the first time all day, Yui's lips twitched and she formed a smile. She slowly nodded while keeping her light smile and sighed. "Yes…yes it is. I'm very blessed with what I have and who I have."

Before the conversation should be initiated any further, Yui's personal cell phone in her pocket began ringing and she was reluctant to answer it. Any other day of the week she would've ignored it as she was still on the clock but the fact of the matter was this wasn't a normal day and she knew that her family situation was always subject to change. She pulled her phone out and when she saw it was her husband calling, she quickly opened it.

"Yes, dear? Is everything okay?" Yui asked.

Her fellow officer could only watch and the situation somehow became worse when she saw Yui's facial features melt. Her face painted the horror image of a woman who was finally pushed the edge. All her efforts to keep her family safe were about to be made in vain as her husband continued to update her on the deteriorating situation.

"I'm on my way. Keep talking to her and don't let her do it." Yui's suspiciously calm voice told her fellow officer that this situation was much worse than he thought.

Yui tucked her phone away, put her hands on her hips, and sighed. She paused until she looked at her fellow officer and said, "Yeah…uh…I have to go now. My cousin just locked herself in a hospital room bathroom and is threatening to kill herself. Something about someone jumping out a window. I have to go."

(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)

Though the Hiiragi family was relieved that their youngest member was back on planet Earth, they wished she came back as a result of more mainstream methods. It kind of upset Miki and Tadao when their middle daughter had to tell Tsukasa that she was pregnant to get her mind back, mainly because it was true. Matsuri revealed everything to her family about her boyfriend Lance, including where he was from in America, his school history, hobbies, even what his parents were like. It also disappointed her parents to know that she was keeping a secret like this from them for so long without telling them. It was clear to them that she had been going out with him for awhile as she revealed the lengthy details.

"When did all of this happen, Matsuri?" Miki finally asked the big question as the family sat in the living room.

Matsuri stared blankly at her phone, expecting her boyfriend to text her back soon until she looked up. "Well…remember that one trip I supposedly took with my friends to Maza Onsen?"

Miki recalled the time nearly a month earlier when Matsuri came to her and asked permission to go to Maza Onsen, a hot springs resort north of the Saitama Prefecture with her friends. It seemed harmless enough as long as she promised to keep in contact if something came up. Miki nodded to answer Matsuri's question and allowed her to continue.

"Well…I did go…but it was only with one person." She blushed lightly. "It was his treat. He wanted a simple romantic weekend with me and I happily accepted."

"And…?" Inori said.

"And what? That's all you're getting from me." Matsuri quickly snapped.

"Uh-uh! You owe us details, Matsuri!" Inori retorted, her eyes twitching with curiosity while Tsukasa also blushed at the table. "Wait a minute…so that's why you got that bikini wax before you left!"

"Inori!" Matsuri quickly shouted back. Tsukasa and Miki couldn't help but giggle despite the horrendous day that they had and Matsuri saw the slight fun they were having at her expense. She sighed lightly and replied with a smile, "Yeah…yeah that's why I got the wax. Let's just say you don't prune the hedges unless you're expecting company in the front yard if you know what I mean."

Tadao threw a look of disgust and quickly covered his ears while he stood and quickly removed himself from the room. The four Hiiragi women couldn't help but giggle at Matsuri's joke but more so Tadao's blunt reaction to it as he ran off. Matsuri was happy that she could help in relieving some of the sadness and sorrow her family was feeling after the departure of Kagami. She had only known that she was pregnant for a few hours but and it amazed her to see how much the announcement of a new baby could make on people, even in the worst of situations.

Matsuri began to rub her stomach lovingly as she looked down at it. She also never expected to be the first one of the Hiiragi daughters to become a mother. Everyone always had their eyes on Inori because she was the oldest, most responsible, and had the most motherly instincts about her with Tsukasa right behind her. She didn't feel much different yet but assumed that would change as the baby would continue to grow inside of her. However, what she was feeling the most was sheer relief that Tsukasa was back to her normal self.

"Hey Matsuri, can I feel your stomach?" Tsukasa asked with enthusiasm.

Matsuri giggled. "Well I'm afraid there's nothing to feel yet, but

sure you can feel."

Tsukasa nodded with a smile and quickly scurried over to her older sister and sat down next to her. She slowly reached out and her hand landed on Matsuri's belly and she began to rub gently over her sister's shirt. Tsukasa was old enough to know all about the reproduction process in humans and that she wasn't going to feel a kick, but that wasn't the point. She smiled and wanted to cry with happiness as she felt the warmth of Matsuri's body becoming a protective cocoon for another life. The youngest Hiiragi daughter's anguishes and devastations were numbed by the sheer joy she felt at knowing that in less than a year, she would be an aunt.

Suddenly, Matsuri's cell phone began ringing, making the middle Hiiragi daughter jump in anticipation and she looked at the screen. Her heart pounded thunderously upon seeing that it was her boyfriend's number and she quickly answered the phone and put it on speaker.

"…Hello Lance…I guess you got my text message." Matsuri said awkwardly.

"Yeah I did. It said to call you right away. How are you feeling?" His voice asked over the phone.

Inori elbowed Matsuri and whispered, "He sounds cute…"

Matsuri elbowed her sister back and stood and walked to the center of the living room while holding her phone. "I'm doing fine now…because I have something very important to tell you."

"What's that, dear?" He asked.

Matsuri gulped as the moment of truth had finally arrived for her. She took a deep breath and blurted, "I'm pregnant."

Silence was the only response at first, which was to be expected when dropping a bomb like this on an unsuspecting person. Matsuri knew her boyfriend was going to be quiet at first but that

wasn't what she was afraid of. In the back of her mind, she still knew that it was possible for her boyfriend to become a flight risk as he was foreign and could easily hop the next plane out of Japan. She tried to take comfort in the fact that she had been dating him for six months and believed that she had a more than firm grasp of who and what he was like.

The rest of Matsuri's family on the other hand wasn't so optimistic yet despite her words of confidence backing her boyfriend's character. They leaned forward in anticipation and even Tadao quickly returned upon hearing the ongoing conversation. He already had a sinking feeling that this was going to be a very short conversation and he planned on being there to catch his daughter when she fell to her knees and cried.

"You're…you're what…?" He asked with a nervous stutter.

"I said I'm pregnant." Matsuri calmly said again.

"Matsuri…" Lance whispered over the phone. "That…that's great, baby!"

Matsuri simply smiled. "I finally told my family about us and I think they want to meet you."

"I'd…I'd be honored…as long as you promise they won't kill me. I mean, I would love for our baby to have a father with an intact face." Lance said with a bit of nerves in his voice.

Matsuri giggled and turned back to her family with a satisfied smirk while they still showed surprised expressions. "I'm sure they're looking forward to meeting you. But considering the situation my family is in, I think we should wait for about a week because of…you know."

"I understand your family needs space in this horrible time and I just want you to know that I love you and you always know where to find me if you need someone to talk to. Give your family my love." Lance said. "I just got off the phone with my mom in California and everyone in my family is praying for your

sister and your family. Love you, sweetheart."

Matsuri's satisfied smirk deepened. "Love you too…and thank you. Kisses."

She closed her cell phone and looked back at her family. Matsuri felt that she had scored another victory in regaining her family's trust after her closet door was opened and a mass grave of skeletons piled out. Nonchalantly, Matsuri sat back down next to Inori and Tsukasa while crossing her legs happily.

"I told you that you guys had nothing to worry about." Matsuri said with pride and did her best to keep the happier momentum alive despite the fact that there was one less member in the Hiiragi family to share the euphoria with. "Lance is in love with me and I love him. He's going to stick by my side."

Inori patted Matsuri's bare leg near her jean shorts. "Good for you, Matsuri. I have to admit that I was with dad when he said that your boyfriend was most likely going to abandon you, but you proved us wrong. I'm sorry for doubting you."

"No prob, sis." Matsuri replied with a smile.

"But you still owe us details. Did he sweep you off your feet? Did he make it a very romantic weekend?" Tsukasa suddenly became proactive.

Nobody expected such happiness from Tsukasa, especially considering the incredibly traumatic experiences she went through. Matsuri couldn't explain it either, but she decided that some questions were better left unanswered. At least all of this excitement made Tsukasa stop her grotesque talk of suicide.

"Well, you know me. Normally I don't like that usual girly stuff but with Lance it was always so much different." Matsuri began which made her father quickly leave the room again, making the Hiiragi women giggle again as the middle daughter continued. "Anyway, each morning he served me breakfast in bed while massaging my feet. After that we would bathe together in the hot

springs."

"Together?! Completely naked?!" Inori squealed.

Matsuri blushed slightly and nodded with a grin. "Yep…and it was…my first time with a guy that Saturday night. I know it's a cliché but we…made love…in front of a burning fireplace after we held each other close and talked for hours."

Miki was happy for her daughter but at the same time her motherly instincts made her concerned. She cleared her throat upon hearing the last sentence and said, "I hope he didn't pressure you or anything."

"Actually it was my idea." Matsuri confessed, making her mother's eye twitch. "What can I tell you mom? He swept me right off my feet, just like Tsukasa said."

Tsukasa giggled but the pain of Kagami's death was still fresh in her memory and she retracted back into her bubble of sadness. Regardless, she could only think one thing about this situation involving Kagami.

Sis…you would be so proud of Matsuri right now.

CHAPTER 18

"Kona-chan, please think about this! Haven't we all had enough heartache for one lifetime already?!" Ayano wailed as she sat in her wheelchair outside the bathroom door where Konata had locked herself in. The orange-haired girl was surrounded by hospital staff and her boyfriend, the security guard. "Your cousins are on their way right now to talk to you so please don't do anything you'll regret! There…there has to be an explanation as to why Tamura-san did that horrible thing to herself!"

The only retort that Konata gave was complete silence. She had been quiet for awhile now and no one could even hear her crying anymore. People were beginning to fear that she did do something in there and Ayano quickly rolled herself out of the

way as her boyfriend moved forward with a set of master keys and was about to unlock the door.

"Don't come in here!" Konata's crying voice screamed suddenly, making the crowd outside jump back. "I did it! I killed my friend!"

"Don't say that, Kona-chan!" Ayano yelled back. "Please, tell us what happened! We just want to help!"

More silence followed until they could hear the faint whimpers and squeaks of Konata's cries. They heard her moving inside the bathroom and suddenly, a piece of paper slid under the door from Konata's side and Ayano bent down to pick it up. She held it in her hands and it didn't take her long to realize that she was holding Hiyori Tamura's suicide note. Her eyes bounced back and forth on the paper, absorbing and analyzing every word and trying to discover the root of the suicide and Konata's budding breakdown. Hiyori's final thoughts projected the image of a mind that had lost all hope in humanity and herself. It also gave a porthole into a part of Hiyori Tamura that nobody knew existed.

Ayano lowered the paper and focused her attention back on the door. "Kona-chan, you can't listen to what she said! Why she did that…she…she was scared and wasn't thinking! She had just witnessed her friends be murdered in front of her and she had undergone a horrible life-altering injury! In her panicked mind, it was the only way out!"

"But I provided her with that way out! I knew there was something wrong with Izumi Wakase before today! Hiyorin said she would do her best to find out what was troubling her and I failed Wakase! Now I failed Hiyorin and they're both dead! Kagami and Patty are also dead because I failed Wakase!" Konata coughed in flustered devastation at the end. "I couldn't save Wakase, I obviously didn't see Hiyorin doing that so I'm the worst! What kind of a friend am I?! I deserve to die!"

"Wait! You don't deserve to die! No one could've predicted that Wakase would've done what she did this morning or that Hiyori would've committed suicide! Besides, if you die, I'll have nobody

left!" Ayano cried. "Please don't leave me! I need you! Hiiragi-chan is dead…and so is Misa-chan!"

Upon hearing the last name, Ayano's boyfriend quickly jerked his head downward with a shocked and broken face. His eyes were big and his mouth was gaping open as he began to tremble upon hearing Ayano scream that his sister was dead. The crying orange-haired girl quickly looked up at him with eyes that regrettably spoke the truth when she claimed the eccentric brown-haired girl was no more.

"I'm sorry, Masato, but it's true. Misa-chan was murdered in front of me." She sniffed and trembled upon revealing the truth.

The young man who was intimately close with Ayano Minegishi gulped deeply and began to breathe hard while the look on his face was so distraught that she had to look away as she let more tears escape her eyes. Though he was devastated by the loss of his sister and wanted to run away and cry, he knew someone was sitting before him that still needed him to be by her side. He put his pain aside and placed his hands on Ayano's shoulders and squeezed gently, making her lift a hand up and place it on top of his.

Ayano turned back to the door and continued. "Remember only a few minutes ago when we became friends through this horrible nightmare? Hiiragi-chan was your best friend and Misa-chan was mine and because of that, we decided to become closer friends to keep the memories of them alive. Please don't abandon me like this!"

Konata remained silent inside the bathroom.

"I know that you're upset because you believe you let your friend down, but this wasn't your fault! I read the same note you did and she doesn't blame you or even Wakase-san for what happened to her!" Ayano continued to plea. "Don't make the same mistake Tamura-san did and abandon a friend in need! I need you now, Kona-chan, and I know you need me, too!"

"Listen to her, Konata!" A new voice erupted from the hospital

room entrance.

Everyone turned and saw Yui Narumi rush into the room and she was accompanied by Yutaka and Miyuki. Yui wasn't going to spare any expense at talking her cousin off the cliff she was about to throw herself over. Yutaka quickly rushed over to the door and knocked on it while trying to remain calm, though the seemingly never-ending horrors and stresses of this day were making it much more difficult for her.

"Onee-chan, please come out." Yutaka whispered in a trembling voice. "Tamura-san sacrificed herself to save me so please… please don't take yourself away from me when I'm finally able to be with you again."

Konata remained quiet.

"What Minegishi-san was saying is the truth! Don't abandon all of us! Not now, not ever! Minami is gone but because of her I was able to become closer with Miyuki-san, as you are with Minegishi-san!" Yutaka continued to plead and acknowledged that her tough act was futile and she began crying again upon mentioning Minami's name.

"It doesn't matter!" Konata's devastated and even angry voice finally snapped back through the door. "Did you read what she wrote?! She completely lost hope and for good reasons! There is no hope anymore! I'm not even convinced we had any to start with and we were just fooling ourselves! I feel like her, now! I don't know who to trust!"

"We're your family, Konata!" Yui stepped forward again. "If you can't trust us, who can you trust? Yourself?"

It was when Konata's response was another round of silence that convinced Yui that she had a bigger problem on her hands than she thought.

"Oh my god…you really don't trust us or even yourself anymore, do you?" She asked again.

"...I don't know how to answer that anymore Yui-nee-san." She replied with a sniff. "I can't do this anymore!"

"Damn it, Konata Izumi, if you hurt your family anymore than they already are, I swear by the almighty that I will never forgive you and I will not mourn you when you kill yourself!" A sudden and thunderous voice ripe with pure anger echoed in the room. Everyone turned and took several steps back when they saw the source of the anger came from Miyuki Takara. "We all lost somebody we love today! No one was immune to the atrocities we were forced to endure and now you're literally forcing your own family to go through the same process all over again, including your friends like me! Yutaka and I both lost somebody we deeply care about today so please, show me the logic in making us lose another person we deeply care about! What about Tsukasa-san?! Her sister is dead and she's still crying for her and you're going to make her cry even louder and longer when you take yourself away from her?! Pull yourself together!"

Neither Yutaka nor Yui had seen such anger come from Miyuki before and most didn't even think such raw emotions even existed in the pink-haired girl. But even Yutaka herself was startled by her newfound friend's fury as she panted hard and gritted her teeth with the scowl of a ferocious animal over Konata's irrational thoughts and potential actions. The always kind-hearted and polite Miyuki Takara transformed when she knew that Yutaka was in danger of being hurt again, something Miyuki promised she wouldn't let happen after what happened to Minami.

As quickly as Miyuki transformed into the furious fireball of passion, she suddenly reverted back to her old self with a calm and gentle demeanor. "I understand why you're so upset, Konata-san. Out of all of us, you lost the most today. Patty-chan, Kagami-san, and Tamura-san are gone, Wakase-san was the shooter, and your father is in a coma. You were just like the rest of us today; innocent and pure of heart with no grudges or vendettas against anybody. I cannot even begin to imagine the pain that is constricting every fiber of your being right now, but please believe me when I tell you this. You are not alone. For some reason, and it is a mystery to me, this horrible event chose us out of all the schools in the entire world. I may be secular in my

ways, but I do believe that this world we live in is a constant battlefield between clairvoyant forces of good versus evil and we're caught in the middle and it is times like this that we are forced to choose sides that ultimately reveal our true colors. The evils of this world took Izumi Wakase and our other friends away from us, but I already know your true colors, Konata-san. You are one of the sweetest and most loving people I have ever met and despite your hobbies, you are always thinking about the ones you love more than anything else. Please…please don't stop thinking that way. Don't convince yourself that you are all alone and that no one can be trusted because of what happened to the ones closest to you. Because of this event, don't think of me or Minegishi-san as your friends anymore. See us as your family. The ones that love you and will be nothing short of heartbroken if you let the evil forces take hold of you and carry you away from us."

Yutaka stepped forward again as she still cried. "Onee-chan…I love you. You're one of the only ones I have left now. If you take yourself away…I'll be just like you. I won't know who to trust. Please…come out of there and hug me. I need one from only you now more than ever so please hold me tighter than you ever have before. It can only be from you. Konata…"

Everyone held their breath in nail biting anticipation of the hysterical blue-haired girl's next move. She had been quiet since she made her proclamation that she couldn't trust anyone, not even her own family anymore, which worried everyone surrounding the door. No one knew if she was even still listening. Or if she was still alive. Miyuki placed both her hands on Yutaka's shoulders to show she would still be there for her if it was discovered the worst case scenario happened. Though Miyuki claimed to be more secular in her thinking and lifestyle, she prayed relentlessly in her mind that Konata heeded her words and that she would make the right decision.

After several seconds of terrifying tranquility, a click was heard from the other side of the bathroom door and the knob turned. The thick wooden door moved open and Konata Izumi stood before everyone with a scalpel in her hand while still crying endlessly though she didn't have a scratch on her. She stared her mimicking little cousin in her soaked eyes until the metal instrument slipped from her grasp and it clanged on the floor.

Konata lifted her arms and Yutaka wasted no time in rushing her cousin and hugging her.

Yutaka once again let it all out. She cried loudly while holding Konata and the blue-haired girl also vented her disgorge of sadness for everything that had happened to her and the ones she loved today. When she was locked in the bathroom, she never felt more alone in her life and planned to end it all, but Miyuki's words sank into her heart and soul. The last thing she wanted to have on her mind was the fact that she would be forcing more hurt and devastation onto the few close ones she had left when she planned to drive the scalpel into her neck. Though she knew the recovery process was going to be long, painful, and paved with uncertainties, she did know that Yutaka was safe and that she would be taken care of by Miyuki. She also didn't want to make Ayano lose another friend because one was already too many.

As Ayano was reveling in watching the warming and optimistic scene of Konata and Yutaka crying and hugging each other, Yui was still curious about something. She tapped Ayano, who still held Hiyori's suicide note, and asked to see it. The orange-haired girl obliged and handed it to her. As she heard Konata apologize to Yutaka for scaring her so deeply and move on to embrace Miyuki, Yui read the note from start to finish.

Upon its completion, Yui took an unusual step out of her boundaries and folded it several times quietly while everyone's attention was still focused on her blue-haired cousin. She quickly tucked it away in one of her shirt pocket and planned to dispose of it later. Though she wasn't related to Hiyori and this matter wasn't any of her business, she knew there was nothing in that note that would be of any comfort or closure to her family. If anything, it would only make things worse for them because they still believed their daughter was alive and out of surgery. Yui didn't want the family to know that their daughter's last words and thoughts were the ones that truly illustrated a human in complete and utter suffering. It was going to be hard enough for them to learn that Hiyori crawled out of bed into a wheelchair sitting at her bedside, deliberately rolled herself to the low open window, and climb out while letting gravity take her.

Yui sighed to herself and turned back to Konata, Yutaka, Miyuki, and Ayano, who had all formed a group and teary hug. She feared for them. Hiyori's words in her note continued to bounce inside Yui's head and she couldn't help but gulp. Were the deceased girl's words true, especially her final part? Yui could still see the ensemble of written dialogue burned into her brain and projecting itself before her eyes.

This world is no longer the beautiful and endless collage of life that I once saw it and knew it as. I dreamed of becoming a manga artist because all I knew how to see was beauty. Now all I see is endless horrors. I still see the look in Izumi Wakase's eyes and now the once eternal stream of picturesque wonders that I loved and cherished so much has been replaced by an infinite tunnel of darkness and macabre atrocities. It's clear to me now that I was endowed in a world that never existed. Wakase's story and eyes told me that everything I thought was real was merely fantasy and this is the world I live in. A world where we only know pain and uncertainty. My world of manga and anime was my own perfect bubble and it was torn apart by Wakase's bullets, thus throwing me into a trench of horrid and grotesque fears around every corner. My world was shattered by the events of today at Ryoo High School and I cannot go on living like this anymore. I don't want to live in a world where all I know is fear of my pure and innocent world being tainted by the evils people can commit against each other and themselves.

Yui gulped again and couldn't help but make parallels to Hiyori's devastated words. Despite her older age and career that required a lot of maturity, she couldn't help but feel that she lost a bit of her own innocence and peace of mind. As a police officer, she was trained to deal with worst case scenarios, but even a massacre at Ryoo High School where her sister and cousin attended seemed so ghastly that it couldn't possibly come true. She always took refuge in statistics that it could never happen to her or her family, much like getting struck by lightning. Who wakes up one day and automatically fears they'll be struck by lightning or that their school will be the target of a shooting?

As stated before, Yui feared for the group of crying girls before her. Would they ever know safety or peace of mind again? Would they even be able to look at college in the future as an option without fearing that they once again could become a target?

Though Yui didn't know it, she began to feel the same fears that Hiyori expressed to Konata before she committed suicide. Are the public schools now the modern day battlefields where young minds and mentalities are tested and where ultimately some prevail while others perish? Yui still had it in her mind that she wanted to be a mother, but after seeing the expressions on so many parental faces upon learning that their children were no longer of this world, she didn't know anymore. She almost failed to protect her younger sister and cousin all because of feeble orders telling her to stand her ground outside the school. What would her scenario look like if something similar happened to her child or even if something happened to her in the line of duty and she didn't come home one night? Yui once again turned her head away from the girls as the tears began to slow and she continued to think. Though she was a police officer, she never truly saw how uncertain things were until life would one day throw you a curveball and before you knew it, the time you hugged and kissed your loved ones goodbye in the morning would be the last time you would ever see them.

Her pager began beeping and she looked at the screen, telling her she was needed back at the school as the recovery efforts were still ongoing and they needed all the manpower they could get. She checked her sister and cousin one more time and when she saw they were fine because they had each other and were once again linked, she smiled for their sake and abruptly made her return back to the crime scene.

(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)

The shooting at Ryoo High School was a crime that was unlike any other in its violence, brutality, and ultimately, its death toll. Three days after the shooting was over, the final body count was tallied. Two hundred and twenty three people were killed on that warm and beautiful spring morning at Ryoo High School while over eight hundred were wounded. Two hundred and three deaths were students. A country was in deep mourning while an entire world was shocked. However, every single country had one thing in common. They were outraged and demanded answers as to how something so heinous and gruesome could possibly happen. The biggest question was why the first responders were ordered to wait for the Special Assault Team to arrive, which only happened when the shooting was almost over.

Investigative committees were formed by the federal government of Japan to probe this question, including the motives behind Izumi Wakase with help of testimony given by the survivors, as well as where she acquired the weaponry, the bomb supplies, and above all, how to make sure something like this never would happen again.

While officials in the government continued to do what they do best (bicker and point fingers and place blame on the other), the families and friends of everyone affected by the school shooting flocked by the thousands to attend the memorial services held by several different churches and places of Shinto worship across Saitama, Tokyo, and all of Japan. Crowds of so many people packed themselves into every church and worship center in the region to show their support for the families as well as mourn the victims with them.

At one church near the Hiiragi family shrine, the memorial services for Kagami, Hiyori, Minami, Misao, and Patty were commencing. Everyone was dressed in traditional black clothing to mourn them as hymns honoring the dead commenced the service while the news media was kept at bay by police protection. Though the actual burying of the bodies was going to be a private and personal ordeal, this was for the families to show they weren't alone and their grief was shared by the entire world.

Tsukasa sat with her family at the front row, as did Konata, Miyuki, Yutaka, and Ayano. There wasn't a dry eye in the entire church as they stared forward at the high school photos of the departed's senior year in golden frames with bundles of flowers resting at the feet of the tripods holding the pictures. To their left and right sat more photos on tripods of other students tragically taken during the shooting. The gospel singers eventually finished their last song and everyone took their seat as the service commenced when the priest made his way to the podium and gazed upon all of the crying faces sitting in the benches.

"We're gathered here today to mourn the losses of the victims of the shooting at Ryoo High School nearly a week ago. Its times like these that we ask ourselves many questions and we desperately seek answers. The only thing more devastating than

losing a child in the prime of their youth is to lose them under circumstances to which there are no answers. In times like these, we simply ask ourselves why? Why did the forces of evil choose our community and our children? And we also have to ask where was God when all of this was happening?" The priest began his eulogy for the dead. "When we start to lose faith and when we start to believe that there is no hope, we simply have to look around at each other for there is faith and there is hope amongst us. There was faith, there was hope, and there were even miracles that happened in that school on that dreadful day. We must remember that there are forces of good versus evil that fight each other every day and the forces of good truly shined on many students that day. We must remember students like Minami Iwasaki, who saved the lives of seventeen students in the school's locker room despite her own injury and ultimately gave her life saving an eighteenth life. We must also remember students like Kagami Hiiragi, who in the face of unprecedented dangers and surmounting odds helped save the lives of her friends while confronting the shooter. When we begin to lose our faith and hope in ourselves and our fellow man, we must stop, take a deep breath, and remember such individuals, for the world is full of them and they continue to bless us every day. We knew them in everyday life and now, we will remember them in our dreams and our hearts. God bless and God rest these beautiful souls and all who were involved in this dastardly event. And now…I believe friends and relatives wish to make a few statements regarding the deceased."

It was the youngest Hiiragi daughter in Tsukasa that slowly rose to her feet first and walked the short yet so long distance from the front row to the podium where the priest backed away. Wearing a black dress and two purple ribbons that belonged to Kagami's twin pigtails around the shoulder straps of her dress, she sniffed again and dried her eyes one last time before she stepped forth and looked forward at the sea of faces also joining her in the teary shows.

"My…my name is Tsukasa Hiiragi…and Kagami Hiiragi…is…my fraternal twin sister. She was more than just my sister. She was the epiphany of everything I admired and desired to be. Her tastes in her interests were modest and simple…but she was anything but simple. She was and still is the greatest human being that we were blessed with and that I was blessed with as a

sister. I never saw myself as a strong person, but I always knew that it was okay because Kagami was always there for me…and she still is." Tsukasa said into the microphone as her family watched, all crying. "She was there for me when I thought my time was up in the school, but she wouldn't let that be the case. She…she gladly sacrificed herself so that I would continue to be blessed with same fortunes in our family that we shared together. Kagami's last words to me were, 'be strong, Tsukasa Hiiragi, be strong.' Well sis, I know you can still hear me and here in front of everyone, I promise to you that I will be strong…and I will make you proud. I love you, sis…and thank you…for saving my life… and for showing me what true courage looks like and what everyone should look up to. Goodnight…and sweet dreams, sis."

Tsukasa wiped her eyes again and backed away from the podium and as she rejoined her family, Yutaka Kobayakawa slowly rose, also wiping her eyes and trying to remain calm. She let go of Miyuki's hand and everyone watched the petite girl walk up the stage and give the speech that, like Tsukasa, came from her heart.

"My name is Yutaka Kobayakawa…and I was friends with Minami Iwasaki. Before this event, we were best friends…and she meant so much more to me than that. Even calling her my family wouldn't be doing her name or her person justice. Before I started high school, I felt empty and worthless inside. I was born with a sickly constitution and I become ill very quickly, which made it very hard for me to become friends with anyone. Before I met Minami Iwasaki, I had very little hope of that ever changing when I started Ryoo High School only a few months ago. It was this very special green-haired girl that changed all of that." Yutaka also gave an emotional memorial. "Minami Iwasaki is a hero in more ways than one. She was not only the first friend I made at Ryoo High School, she gave her life to save me. I miss her every day but I still count myself lucky every day not only because I'm still alive, but that I had the blessing and the privilege to know a young woman as selfless, caring, compassionate, and loving as her. Minami Iwasaki gave me a second chance and I will live for her from now on and I thank you, Minami Iwasaki. Thank you for saving me…and thank you for being my friend. I love you…and goodbye."

When the shorter girl was finished, she too backed away from the

podium and inspired by her eulogy, Konata Izumi let go of Ayano Minegishi's hand and stood up. Walking forward, she stepped up on stage as the church remained completely quiet as the mourning continued. When the blue-haired girl reached the podium and looked forward, she didn't bother wiping her eyes as she spilled her heart for the world to hear.

"A few days ago…a very close friend of mine said that I suffered the most loss out of everyone that day. Four of my closest friends were killed that day…one of whom was the shooter, Izumi Wakase." Konata began and she could hear faint gasps in the audience. "My father was also wounded in the shooting and is in a coma right now and the doctors don't know if he'll ever wakeup…and I never knew my own mother. Yet despite all of this…I still have to disagree with my friend when she said I suffered the most that horrible day."

Miyuki's ears perked up, as did Yutaka's as the two girls held each other's hands and watched Konata continue her speech.

"I honestly feel that I am truly blessed with all that I have…and all the people that I know." Konata let more water drip from her eyes. "As I stand here and as I listened to these two previous amazing girls' speeches, I am only reminded of what I still have, and not what I have lost. Yutaka Kobayakawa is my cousin and Tsukasa Hiiragi is my best friend's sister, Kagami Hiiragi. I'm honestly not much for big speeches and I don't know how accurate I am in this thinking, but when I see those two amazing young women pull themselves up after such a devastating day, I can only smile to myself with happiness that I too am blessed to know such incredible people. Yu-chan…I love you. Tsukasa…I love you. Ayano Minegishi…I love you, too."

Tsukasa quickly covered her face as more tears flowed from her face and she was quickly comforted by her mother. Miyuki smiled lightly and politely at Konata while Yutaka also copied the pink-haired girl's gesture and pulled herself closer to her. Ayano sat in the front row also and cupped her hands together with a small smile of her own.

Konata cleared her voice again and continued. "And one of my friends who didn't survive that day gave up on mankind too

easily in my opinion. She suffered immensely mentally and physically from the injury she incurred that day and she committed suicide, but I don't blame her. In her final words, she said that she could no longer see the beauty in this world after the event…but I still see beauty. I just witnessed it with Yutaka and Tsukasa. Their actions, their words, their hearts…the true epiphany of the word beauty and how it applies to this world no matter what else we may encounter in our lives whether it's good or bad. Tsukasa…Yutaka…thank you. And I'll never forget you… Kagami-sama."

With that, Konata backed away from the podium and the memorial service continued for the rest of the victims being remembered at the church. Other friends and family members gave heartfelt eulogies and speeches which only resulted in more tears from everyone in the sacred building until it was over. When the services were over and the people began to leave the church, the Hiiragi family continued to wallow with depression as they still had a personal funeral of their own to carry out.

As they walked through the parking lot on the once again picturesque spring day, they approached their car but saw a man standing next to the car wearing a black suit with a bouquet of flowers in his hand. He wasn't Japanese and he had a look of concern as he leaned against another car and it seemed as if he was waiting for someone. He had brown hair and green eyes with a clean shaven face and was tall.

When Matsuri saw him, she froze in her steps and formed a surprised look on her face, grabbing her family's attention. She soon smiled and walked forward, grabbing the man's attention this time. When he looked up and saw her walking towards him, he smiled and stood tall for her as she approached him. It was now clear to the Hiiragi family that this was Lance Bronson, Matsuri's boyfriend. When she stood before him with her hands on her hips, he handed his flowers over to her and she took them graciously as her family moved forward.

"I told you not to come today." Matsuri said lightly.

"I know, I know…but I just couldn't help it. I love you, Matsuri." He said while looking away. "I…I just wanted to come and pay

my respect. If we want this to work out between us, I want your family to become my family."

Matsuri squinted her eyes at him until she couldn't help but sigh happily and roll her eyes. "Come here you lovable dumbass."

Matsuri latched onto his black tie and pulled him down and gently kissed him on the lips as he cupped both her cheeks in his hands. The middle Hiiragi daughter kept the kiss quick as she knew her family was right behind her and as quickly as she initiated it, she broke it off and turned back to her family, who held blank faces, not really knowing what to do next as she held her flowers.

"Everybody, this is Lance." She said and introduced her boyfriend and she turned back to him. "Lance, can you introduce yourself?"

He smiled at her and stepped forward to the Hiiragi family. Taking in all of their faces, he bowed initially to them and began to establish his place within their family by addressing them all together.

"My name is Bronson Lance. First off, I wish to express my deepest sympathies and warmest wishes to you all in this trying time." He said with sincerity. "I also wish to express my undying love to your daughter and sister, Matsuri. I love her and I honor her and I am going to stay by her side and raise this child with her. I do wish that I could be with her in more…formal circumstances…but I hope that one day we can see each other as a family."

Miki and Tadao looked at each other and it seemed this young man came to them at the right time. He was there to show them that they weren't alone and that Matsuri was never going to know any unhappiness or loneliness. Miki stepped forward and instead of bowing to him, she hugged him tightly.

CHAPTER 19

ONE YEAR LATER

Despite everyone's best efforts involved in the recovery process at Ryoo High School, the school couldn't be saved. Izumi Wakase's bomb had destroyed the massive structure and it became too expensive to repair, so a decision was made final by the city. The school was demolished completely one month after all the fires were put out and all the bodies were recovered. No school would ever be built back on the same spot for now it was seen by the community, as well as the rest of the world as hallowed ground. Instead, a peace park was constructed at the center with gardens of flowers, fountains, and long marble walls with the names of everyone killed in the shooting engraved on them. It became a safe haven and a place of closure for the families and friends of the victim, a place that added more than the silence of a grave.

One year after the Ryoo High School shooting, life drastically changed for a certain group of girls with half of their friends now on the marble walls instead of by their sides. It was without a doubt the hardest and longest recovery process any of them were forced to endure, especially considering the fact that they would be going through it for the rest of their lives. Some had to attend therapy sessions while some had to be prescribed medication to counter anything from post-traumatic stress to deep depression. The winter months later that year after the shooting proved difficult as well as the group of fractured girls attended school to finish their high school education at different schools in Tokyo. Every day was nothing short of a war from simply getting out of bed in the cold mornings to clawing their way through another day until they could rest their heads on their pillows at night and dream empty dreams. As the darkness and frigid isolation as another winter came, life once again began to shine on the country one morning.

It could closely resemble the stages of the moon throughout the course of one month. The brightness of the atmospheric rock was so bright and full before the school shooting. In the weeks and months after the massacre, its brightness and fullness dimmed and became smaller until it disappeared completely, ringing in the new winter season, as well an infinite dark and cold night that stretched on for months. It was in this endless night where the group of five remaining girls feared that more of them would fall and their fractured tower would finally collapse. Despite their mental anguish, all of them grossly underestimated how

much strength they had within them and when a new pair of lungs announced itself as the newest member of a certain family, true strength prevailed as the darkness of the metaphorical night began to fade one day as the sun rose.

With the burning glint of orange slowly peeking over the horizon, a new day was about to begin over Saitama. The warmth of the spring day brought cheery attitudes as only a few months ago, the country of Japan was hit hard with an unusually fierce winter that resulted in record snowfall. These warming months not only brought better weather, but great senses of optimism and the idea of making the spring and upcoming summer ones to remember. The lushes green shrubbery and landscapes invited better days ahead of them as the sun rose higher into the sky.

At a house that bordered a religious shrine, a young but now mature girl with short hair stirred and awoke upon hearing her alarm clock. She quickly reached over and turned it off and Tsukasa Hiiragi lifted her tired body up and stretched while yawning. Upon seeing what day it was marked on her calendar, she quickly initiated a newfound morning routine modeled after her late sibling, Kagami Hiiragi. Today was a big day for her and one that she would always remember.

Tsukasa pulled herself out of her bed and while rubbing her sleepy eyes, she glanced at her desk and saw two items that made her heart beat warmly and she scurried over to her desk. The short haired girl turned on her desk lamp and the bright light suddenly illuminated two framed images that she cherished deeply. One was a simple picture of Kagami smiling while the second was a piece of white paper with an etching of Kagami's name. Tsukasa visited the Ryoo High School memorial one day and made an etching of her sister's name engraved on one of the marble walls. She kept those two items close to her person whenever she worked so feverishly on her school work and when she was applying to only the best colleges.

Tsukasa smiled at the two items and whispered, "Ready to start our new life, sis?"

Despite the absence of a response by the two items, Tsukasa still smiled warmly and continued her morning routine with a shower

and other personal hygiene rituals. Tsukasa dressed herself nicely for her big day and while she continued to fix her hair in the mirror, she heard the front door downstairs opening and her smile became wider as she giggled happily, knowing who had just arrived.

She quickly put the final touches on her outward appearance and dashed down the stairs. Tsukasa's smile brightened once again when she saw her older sister in Matsuri close the front door behind her and she held a baby's car seat by the handle as she gently carried it in. She was accompanied by her fiancé, Lance Bronson, who had his usual cheery and happy atmosphere around him. When Matsuri saw her little sister waiting anxiously for her and her child, she couldn't help but smile.

"He's asleep right now." Matsuri whispered.

"It took him long enough." Lance suddenly said, though in a loud and sudden voice, thus waking the baby and triggering the infant to start crying.

"You dumbass!" Matsuri snapped angrily while punching him in the shoulder. "It took me over an hour to get him to stop crying! I have a job interview today you know so I don't need this crap from him and especially you!"

Lance rubbed his shoulder. "Oops, sorry honey."

While Matsuri continued to rear her masculine side and scrutinize her fiancé, Tsukasa saw a golden opportunity and take charge of the situation. She outstretched her arms and begged to help, which Matsuri allowed without a second thought and she sat the car seat down. Tsukasa bent down to the crying baby and picked him up while whispering loving and affectionate words in a sweet voice.

"Hello there, sweetness. Come to your Aunt Tsukasa." She said happily and rubbed her nose with the baby's.

Matsuri's son they named Kyou suddenly began to cease his

tantrum and giggle lightly as Lance rested the baby bag on the floor. "It never ceases to amaze me how good you are with him, Tsukasa." He observed.

"It's nothing. Who couldn't be a natural with this sweet, precious little thing?" Tsukasa replied as her voice became more high-pitched towards the end. "Thanks again for leaving him here before I go today."

Matsuri smiled. "It's not a problem. We're happy that you get to spend time with him before you go."

"Yeah we don't know what we're going to do without you, Tsukasa. I'm sure Kyou-chan will miss you the most." Lance added with his usual charming smile. "But you have to follow your dreams and maybe meet that extra special someone. I know I'm still looking for my extra special someone."

Matsuri formed a tight frown on her face and looked up at her tall boyfriend until he looked down at her and saw her piercing stare.

"Oh look, here she is!" Lance playfully exclaimed with a laugh while pointing at Matsuri.

"Knock it off." Matsuri bit back and whacked his hand away. "Sometimes I think raising Kyou-chan is easier than raising and cleaning up after you. Grow up already."

"I don't wanna! Make me!" Lance retorted with a smirk.

Matsuri rolled her eyes as she began to rummage through the baby bag. "Such an idiot."

Lance smirked again and when Matsuri stood again, he held out his hand with a golden ring wrapped around his ring finger for her to see. "But I'm your idiot…forever…!"

Tsukasa giggled as she gently bounced her nephew in her arms.

What her sister and her future brother-in-law may have seemed bizarre in the beginning, but everyone could see underneath that they loved each other. Tsukasa had to admit to herself that when she first met Lance a year ago, she was still cautious and didn't trust him, but after he met the family at the memorial service, he was always there and he transformed into a borderline superhero for them. He spent all of his time with Matsuri and saw her through her pregnancy and ultimately the birth of their son without missing a step and he was always the "fun dad" and big brother for Tsukasa and Inori. This still irritated Matsuri every now and then but she couldn't honestly complain about anything. Her boyfriend proposed to her, they found a place of their own, and became responsible and, for the most part, mature individuals.

In was going to pain Tsukasa to have to leave all of them, but she had a plane to catch. Her late sister's words of making Tsukasa promise her to make her proud never once stopped replaying themselves in the youngest Hiiragi daughter's head and she never stopped studying. She worked harder than anyone had ever seen before and to some, she even surpassed Kagami's old studying habits and routines and graduated at a high percentile in her graduating class. With all of her hard work, it didn't surprise anyone when she applied to a very prestigious private college in Europe and was accepted. Today was her last day in Japan for awhile and she wanted it to be a subtle one. She didn't want a large going away party or big scene at the airport because she knew it would be too sad for her. Spending time with her nephew was going to suit her just fine. She spent time with her other friends a week earlier and was scared about leaving all of them behind, but after witnessing such miracles occur after such a grisly event, she knew everything was going to be okay one way or another.

"So is mom or dad or Inori up yet?" Matsuri whispered again as Tsukasa finally got her son's crying under control.

Tsukasa shook her head. "Not that I know of so it'll just be the two of us. Matsuri, do you have Kyou-chan's stroller with? There's a place I'd like to take him."

Matsuri gasped lightly as her eyes went big. She felt her heart

clench and she sighed with newfound depression. "Is…is that place the one I'm thinking about?"

Tsukasa nodded with a composed face.

Matsuri on the other hand quickly looked away as she felt the water rising in her eyes. She simply nodded, giving her permission to take her son to a special place that meant a lot to the Hiiragi family that wasn't part of the shrine. As Matsuri wiped a tear, she felt her fiancé wrap his arm around her and pull her close while simultaneously planting a kiss on the top of her head. Despite Lance's moments where he would become the world's biggest man child, he always knew when to pull back and be there for Matsuri when she needed him.

The engaged couple unloaded the stroller for the baby and left the rest up to Tsukasa. Lance had to get to work in the city while Matsuri had to get to her job interview, though Lance was only planning on working half the day. He had to see his sister-in-law off at the airport later that day and he wouldn't miss it for the world. As they continued to unload the rest of the baby's supplies for the day, Tsukasa momentarily retreated to her room to collect her two most prized possessions sitting on her desk. The couple remained quiet when they left the baby supplies to Tsukasa and returned to their car. Tsukasa stood outside and waved Kyou-chan's tiny arm gently goodbye for him as he looked around while grunting every now and then.

"Say bye-bye. Say bye-bye." Tsukasa whispered lovingly and gently placed him in the stroller. "Come on, Kyou-chan, let's go for a little walk. I want to take you somewhere."

(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)

Life for the rest of the girls affected by the tragedy one year ago wasn't as promising or warm as it was for Tsukasa. It was the baby that pulled the youngest Hiiragi daughter out of the depths of despair and gave her inspiration to live, as well as Kagami's final words to her. Life for Konata Izumi continued to be a struggle as she made her way into the all-too familiar hospital with yet another bundle of flowers. She held a depressed

expression across her face as she once again moved towards a familiar hospital room as this was becoming too routine for her liking.

Everyday she had to do this, hope continued to fade. Though it was spring time again and the warmth of the inviting weather was giving everyone more senses of optimism again, Konata felt as if she was still stuck in the isolated and infinite winter nights. She still remembered the speech she gave at the church a year earlier when she claimed to be the most blessed despite losing the most. She still felt blessed, but at the same time wished for a way to break this heartbreaking cycle of hers at the hospital.

Konata rounded a corner and found the hospital room she was searching for though she found it easily. Her body was practically on autopilot by this point as she opened the door and walked in and spotted a doctor taking notes over a sleeping man in a bed. He turned his head and spotted the depressed blue-haired girl standing before him and he nodded to her.

"Good morning, Izumi-san." He said as he lowered his clipboard.

Konata nodded back. "Good morning. Is there any change?"

It hurt the blue-haired girl when she watched the doctor shake his head, yet at the same time it didn't surprise her. Every day she came to him and asked this question, only to be met with the same answer. Regardless, she stepped forward and gazed at her father's sleeping body, still in a coma a year after the shooting and his injury. Sighing with deep remorse, she rested the flowers on his bedside table and pulled another chair closer to him and sat.

The doctor gave Konata his best and gave them privacy. Allowing the silence to engulf the room, Konata continued to sit and watch her father's comatose body. He looked as if he was already dead, yet the blue-haired girl still couldn't take her green eyes off the medical equipment telling her that he was still alive and his heart continued to beat. She shifted her eyes away from digital screens and finally looked at him again.

"I was talking to Yui-nee-san the other day. She and her husband are still having troubles. They still can't agree on what they want to do with their futures. I think Kiyotaka finally wants to stop travelling for his business and wants to start a family, but she doesn't anymore." Konata said with depression. "That day…that event…it took so much from us, dad. It took my friends, it took you even though you're still right here, and now it looks like it's going to break up a family before it even gets started. Even though that day has been over for such a long time now, why do I still feel stuck in this infinite limbo?"

Even though Sojiro was in a coma, Konata continued to try and convince herself of the stories that people in comas could still hear the voices around them so she continued to talk.

"As you know, I've been living with Yui and her husband ever since that day. Yutaka still has her bouts of depression and has nightmares almost on a weekly basis. She's been in therapy ever since that day but she still hasn't made a lot of significant progress in her desires to move forward. At least she still has Miyuki to talk to, which she does on a daily basis." Konata informed and her green eyes narrowed as more grim thoughts came to her mind. "Do you even want to wake up, dad? Should you even wake up? There have been a few nights where I would be resting on my futon and I would envy your position. To be able to sleep through all of this pain and uncertainty. Sometimes…I just want to hide…or better yet…disappear."

Konata formed a glare on her face as she stared into space and continued talking.

"Nothing's the same anymore. We try our best everyday to make everything seem status quo but we're only trying to fool ourselves. We've all accepted the fact that our friends are gone and we're still recovering and mourning them, but it's even deeper than that. Nothing feels right anymore. To make matters worse, I can't even pick up a manga or watch an anime without feeling haunted or numb." Konata constricted her grip on her jean shorts in mounting frustration. "Every time I look at the world I used to know, love, and cherish, I feel haunted because I knew a person that shared these interests and became the poster child for pure evil. Izumi Wakase's face is still in the news to this

day and what she did and I'm always reminded that she was an otaku like me. The news also does a damn good job at helping me remember that I'm different with my interests. You can't even imagine what it's like to hear people on the news or elected officials point the blame at manga, anime, or games for what happened. They don't even mention The Hunt Club as the source or what Wakase's life was behind closed doors. I also can't help but feel that even Yutaka looks at me differently now. She doesn't have to say it because her eyes did all of the talking before, but there's a part of her that blames me for Minami Iwasaki's death. A part of her has been sucked in by the media and what they portray as news. It's in these occurrences that I have to ask myself what you would do if you were in my spot, dad. What would you do?"

Silence was the only advice he could give.

"I know if you were here, you would be sharing my anguish in more ways than one. That shooting took more than my friends. It took my sense of identity. It made me question something I never had to in the past because I always knew the answer beforehand. Is it worth it to be an otaku anymore?" Konata asked and it drove a knife into her heart just by asking. "I've never felt closure to Aya-chan since Kagami and Misao didn't make it that day and I'm doing the best I can to move on, but why does it have to be so hard? Tsukasa's monologue for Wakase still haunts me to this day. We're all just kids and why do things like this have to happen to us? I miss what we were…and I hate what we've all become. I should be hanging out with Kagami and Tsukasa right now. To make that worse, I can't stop having this dream…about Kagami."

Konata's upper lips began to quiver and the muscles in her neck tightened as she tried to hold back her emotions. She collected her father's hand and held it, feeling more lost when she felt how cold it was.

"Aya-chan is meeting me here and we were going to the cemetery to see Misao's grave." Konata slowly rose to her feet, not wanting to part with her father's hand until it finally slipped from her grasp. "Dad…if you can hear me, please wake up soon. I want you back. I want everything to be back. I'll see you tomorrow."

The blue-haired girl squeezed his hand one last time until she turned and slowly walked out of the hospital bedroom. When the door sealed shut again, Konata felt her chest clench again. Every time she heard that door slam closed, she felt more isolated and alone despite her newfound friendship in Ayano Minegishi. Her digital watch suddenly began beeping, reminding her of something she needed to do while simultaneously reminding her of why she needed to do it. Konata reached into her shoulder bag and withdrew a plastic prescription bottle filled with yellow oblong-shaped pills. Finding the nearest water fountain, Konata swallowed one of the pills and drank some water to keep it down.

When her process was over, she sighed with more depression and couldn't help but mutter, "To think, these things are supposed to make me happy yet I get depressed whenever I have to take one."

The blue-haired girl shook her head gently again and walked towards the waiting room again. Her downed mood uplifted a bit when she saw Ayano Minegishi sitting and waiting for her in one of the chairs. When she heard her friend approach, she turned her head and stood up without flaw. As expected, Ayano made a full recovery from her injury and continued to take all of her losses in stride. She credited her quick recovery to her friendship with Konata for being there for her every step of the way.

"Hey there, how are you feeling?" Ayano asked with concern.

Konata's only able-bodied response was to shrug with a facial expression that told Ayano all she needed to know.

Ayano patted Konata lightly on the shoulder and began to escort her out of the hospital. "Do you still want to go to the cemetery?"

Konata nodded slowly. "I want to talk to Kagami, too."

(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)

While everyone moved forward with their mourning rituals on

this once again picturesque spring morning, Yutaka Kobayakawa sat at home eating her breakfast. Her mother was growing increasingly concerned with her youngest daughter's distancing tendencies lately and she couldn't help but notice changes in her personality. Yuki assumed it was the one year anniversary of the shooting that was on her mind as coverage of it was on every channel. Some of the survivors were interviewed on TV but Yutaka didn't want anything to do with the reporters or their stories. She was becoming more isolationist from the outside world and hardly spoke much anymore.

As Yutaka sat and ate her breakfast, her mother came over and freshened her glass of juice. The salmon-haired girl barely noticed the gesture as she continued to nibble on her piece of toast with a blank expression. Yuki eyed her passive and unresponsive daughter with concern and showed a sad and worried face as she turned back and returned to the kitchen.

When Yutaka came back to live with her mother and commute to another school to finally graduate, she thought it would be an easy fix if Yutaka was with her. However, it proved to be a falsehood. Yutaka was all alone in her new school and not even Konata or Miyuki went to the same school she did as a result of their distant living situations. At her new school, Yutaka was treated with a certain stigma when everyone learned that she was a victim of the Ryoo High School shooting. Not because they saw her as the culprit, but because they didn't know how to treat her. People wanted to be her friend yet at the same time were too afraid to try for fear of the wrong conversations or topics arising. The fact that she always kept to herself and didn't say anything led some to believe that she wasn't altogether inside her head and that she had the liability to snap one day, just like Izumi Wakase.

Who could blame her though? Out of everyone, Yutaka had to attend the most therapy and had to be prescribed five different types of medication to help her with everything from sleep disorders to severe mood swings. It was all part of the trauma she endured in the shooting and from witnessing the murder of Minami Iwasaki firsthand. No one wanted to be friends with someone who had gone through an ordeal such as that and had practically more drugs in them than the local pharmacy. It still disturbed Yuki that her daughter appeared to be seemingly

unresponsive to anything anymore, as if she was a blank disc. No personality, no life in her voice, no color in her eyes, nothing. She might as well be an emotionless robot.

While Yutaka finished her breakfast, the doorbell rang and Yuki took the cue to walk over to the door. The salmon-haired girl continued to finish her meal without any emotions, even when she heard her mother open the door and say, "Miyuki-san. What a pleasant surprise."

"Thank you and I do apologize for not informing you I would be arriving, but I was hoping to speak to Yutaka." Miyuki's voice was heard from the doorway.

"Certainly. Please come in." Yuki invited and Miyuki graciously accepted while thanking her in the process.

Yutaka wiped her mouth with a napkin and sat in her chair as Miyuki entered the kitchen and approached the frozen girl. She cleared her throat and asked, "Mind if I join you?"

Yutaka's only response was a shrug as she stared into space.

Miyuki slowly sat down despite the absence of an open invitation and sat across from Yutaka. She stared at the salmon-haired girl for several seconds while Yuki gave them privacy, though she still was listening out of concern for her daughter. Miyuki cleared her throat and started with, "I haven't been able to get you to talk to me over those walkie-talkies for awhile. I just wanted to make sure you're okay."

"I'm fine." Yutaka suddenly replied as Miyuki barely had enough time to finish her last sentence.

Silence fell between them until Miyuki added, "That's good. I was just hoping we could talk together for awhile."

"About what?" Yutaka retorted quickly again, also nearly cutting Miyuki off towards the end.

Miyuki stared at Yutaka and tilted her head slightly. "I can't help but get the feeling you want me to leave. Is this true, Yutaka? Because I will if you want me to."

Yutaka however didn't answer as quickly this time. The salmon-haired girl sighed and said, "I don't care, Miyuki. I simply do not care."

Hearing such a frigid response from the once sweet and lively Yutaka Kobayakawa made the pink-haired girl depressed and she released an internal sigh. Miyuki however was still highly intelligent and had a feeling she knew what was going on. She glanced her eyes around a few times and adjusted her glasses before she continued talking.

"Yutaka…it's okay. You don't have to keep pretending anymore." Miyuki started though Yutaka still kept her cold face. "I know what's been bothering you. You still miss Mi-chan, don't you? You miss her so much that you want to keep her alive in both your memories and your conscious realities. You've been acting a lot like her recently. You don't talk much, you show no emotions on your face, yet your heart and soul are both still very heavy with feelings and warmness. You want to keep Minami alive in all aspects, but that isn't your responsibility to bear. I think I speak for all of us when I say that we miss you, Yu-chan, and that you're perfect just the way you are. We all want Minami to still be with us, but even I believe that she would want you to carry on and be yourself because it was you that she treasured as a friend, not this mirror image of herself. I know I miss that happy and caring personality that came with your cute features but I didn't come here to tell you I want the old Yutaka back. I'm here because I want us to stay in contact and I still want and need you to be my friend. I've got nothing else planned today so what do you say we go for a walk together?"

In the beginning of Miyuki's monologue, Yutaka's facial features remained cold and solid like a block of ice. As her speech progressed though, that ice block began to thaw as Miyuki's warm words settled around her. Yutaka's lifeless face began to melt away and her eyes flooded once again, though for the first time in months. When Miyuki finished her piece, Yutaka began to tremble and she covered her face.

Through her covered mouth, she uttered, "...Yuki-chan..."

Miyuki slowly stood and walked to Yutaka and when she was close enough, Yutaka acted. She sprung up and wrapped her arms around the pink-haired girl's waist and pulled her close while crying once again. Miyuki rubbed Yutaka's head and embraced her back while Yutaka let it all out and whimpered loudly while tears flowed freely from her eyes.

"Yuki-chan...I'm sorry...!" Yutaka wailed.

Miyuki shook her head. "Don't apologize to me or anyone else, Yutaka. I'm your friend and I'm not going to leave you. You had to deal with a lot but it's all over now. Now come on...I think there's a place you and I should go together."

(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)

With the sun now high in the sky, Tsukasa rolled the baby stroller to a place of eternal rest and peace. She rolled the stroller to the front gate of a large cemetery not too far away from her family's property and she was graced by the countless tombstones. Pushing the stroller across the cobblestone path, Tsukasa finally came to a tombstone that made her freeze and she parked the stroller. She picked up her baby nephew as he continued to play with a toy and carried him over to it.

Tsukasa sat down in the soft green grass in front of the tombstone as her nephew rested in her lap. Staring forward, Tsukasa gulped when she read the name "Kagami Hiiragi" engraved on the massive stone. She was at her older sister's grave and her eyes moved from her name to the date of her birth to the date of her death on that tragic day.

"I know you've been here before, Kyou-chan, but this place means a lot to me. This is a resting place for one of the greatest humans I've ever had the fortune to know. If it weren't for this remarkable human being, I wouldn't be here right now and I wouldn't be the one spoiling you." Tsukasa said with a smile as her nephew looked forward at the tombstone. "I just want you to

know a few things before I go. If your Aunt Kagami was here today, she would love you unconditionally, just like I do. You're named after her, you know. I once told your mother shortly after Kagami died that you are a chance to start fresh and bring a new life into our lives after one was taken so tragically from us. You're our precious little miracle, Kyou-chan. I want you to promise me something."

Though her nephew was only a few months old and couldn't comprehend the world he was now a part of, Tsukasa had faith that one day her words would sink in.

"I want you to live your life the way Kagami did. She was never afraid of anything, whether that was a physical or mental challenge, and she wasn't afraid to be aggressive when she needed to be, and she wasn't afraid to love at the same time. Every single thing about Kagami was beautiful and perfect, even her final actions on Earth that saved my life. That is the kind of person your aunt is. The epiphany of everything that is perfect and beautiful." Tsukasa felt her voice tighten. "So Kyou-chan, please promise me that when you grow up, live your life the way Kagami did. Be smart, be strong, be determined, be a great person, just like she was. What do you say, is it a deal?"

The only response the toddler gave was a few grunts and he held his plastic toy up to Tsukasa. She couldn't help but giggle and kiss his bald head as she continued to sit with him on her lap and keep her older sister company.

Though Tsukasa didn't know it, she wasn't alone in the cemetery. Over a grassy hill on the other side of the cemetery, Konata and Ayano had finished paying their respects to Misao Kusakabe's headstone. Ayano gave her emotional remembrance to her friend and Koanta was there to comfort her. The orange-haired girl stood up again and wiped her eyes and took several steps back and Konata patted her on her back.

"Are you okay, Aya-chan?" She asked.

Ayano nodded. "Yes…and thank you for coming with me."

Konata nodded back. "And thank you for accompanying me to Patty's and Hiyori's graves. Now I think there's one person left that I think we both need to talk to."

"You're right. I believe Hiiragi-chan's headstone is just over the hill." Ayano whispered and she cupped Konata's hand and they began walking through the cemetery.

The two friends remained silent as they walked through the resting grounds of the Earthly departed. It was difficult to explain, but the two girls felt different as they walked amongst the graves in the quiet area. Not even any birds were singing in the luscious springtime weather. It seemed that they too wanted to remain respectful while Konata and Ayano continued their visit.

Konata and Ayano reached the top of the grassy hill and saw they weren't alone on the hallowed property. They saw a girl their age carry a baby in her arms back towards a stroller but it was the yellow ribbon sitting in her hair that gave away her identity. Konata wanted to scream Tsukasa's name but the influence of where she was kept her quiet. Instead, Konata continued to walk with Ayano down the hill towards Kagami's headstone hoping that she would be noticed but at the same time hoping that Tsukasa wouldn't notice them.

The latter wasn't meant to be. The movement on the hill caught Tsukasa's attention and she turned her head to see Ayano and Konata walking down the green mound towards her, making her smile again. She tucked her nephew in his stroller and walked a short distance to meet them in the middle while keeping a close eye on the baby. The three girls stopped in the middle of the cemetery, each one presenting a different expression. Tsukasa held her smile while Konata showed a depressed expression and Ayano remained placid.

"How have you two been?" Tsukasa asked while picking up on their body language but still smiling.

Konata sighed. "I could be doing better."

Tsukasa knew her friend was still in pain over her home situation and slowly moved her smile away and nodded. "I understand how you feel, Kona-chan."

Konata slowly formed a tight stare at Tsukasa. "Do you, Tsukasa? Do you really?"

Tsukasa was taken back a bit by her friend's sudden and cold response but at the same time understood why she was showing hostility. "Yes I do. I lost my sister on that day in case you remember."

"I lost your sister, three other friends, and my dad." Konata bit back.

"Kona-chan." Ayano whispered in an attempt to keep a fight from breaking out.

"Why are you mad, Kona-chan?" Tsukasa asked with a serious face and her naturally sweet voice. "We all know how much you lost, but you can't forget how much you still have, just like you said before."

Konata quickly looked away. "It…it's just that it's so hard sometimes. I know I still have you guys but…but why does everything still have to hurt so much? I've never felt exposed or paranoid about who I am before but that day changed that for me. How did you get over it, Tsukasa?"

Tsukasa shook her head. "I didn't."

"Then how do you keep smiling and act like nothing happened?" Konata quickly retorted with detectable frustration in her voice.

The youngest Hiiragi daughter turned her head back to the stroller. "He's the reason why I can keep smiling. That baby…the gift of life my sister was able to conceive for our family. My sister's blood runs through him, too, so I see my nephew as another entity that Kagami's life essence dwells within."

"But it's more than just that. How did you become so brave without Kagami with us? I mean you're going to school across the world for crying out loud so why aren't you scared?" Konata replied.

"You think I'm not scared? Let me say to you that I am scared. I'm scared so much that every second is a constant mental battle to keep self-doubt away." Tsukasa quickly added. "But Kona-chan, being brave isn't about not being scared. It's about doing things despite the fact that you are scared. Look at what Kagami did for me. She knew that she was going to die and I can tell you that the fear she felt was thousands of times greater than the fear I feel now, but she didn't let that stop her. She gave her life to ensure that I came out of that school alive. That was bravery, Kona-chan. True bravery. It's because of that that I'm able to go abroad and face whatever lays ahead. Sis was my greatest teacher in lessons of life and bravery."

The blue-haired girl was deeply shocked and even touched by Tsukasa's words. Kagami's younger sister was by her side the whole time, yet Konata never noticed how quickly she grew up. She sighed deeply and whispered, "I love you, Tsukasa."

Tsukasa's smile returned and the youngest Hiiragi daughter walked forward and pulled Konata into a hug. Konata wasted no time in hugging Tsukasa back and squeezing her tight, as if she tried to absorb all the warmth that always flowed out of her. Ayano added herself to the hug as they stood in the middle of the cemetery and they were interrupted when they heard a bell-like voice.

"Oh my goodness." A familiar female voice said.

The three girls turned and saw Miyuki standing next to Yutaka a few yards away from them. They too came to the cemetery to pay their respects to their fallen friends, especially a certain green-haired girl who was also buried nearby. It was then that they knew something truly powerful existed between them. None of the five remaining girls called each other or planned this out to meet at this spot. It was a spontaneous movement that they concocted because of their linked mindsets. Something that never existed before the Ryoo High School shooting. They were

destined to meet here to show each other the strengths of their new alliances, even if it wasn't planned. Yutaka and Miyuki soon added themselves to the hug and the five girls held each other in the cemetery.

Hiyori Tamura once referred to her visions and the world she saw it using anime and manga as catalysts as "a kaleidoscope of beauty." Proof of that was also in her suicide note and that her visions of beauty and a serene world were dashed by the shooting. However, this would be another vision of true beauty if she was alive to see it. To see five girls who might as well have been perfect strangers in the beginning grow closer to each other in the aftermath of a tragedy. They fed off each other's life essences, giving each other the strength and courage to keep going forward while holding each other's hands in the process.

(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)-(-)

When Tsukasa mentioned earlier that she was scared, she truly underestimated her own statements when she sat down inside the large plane that would carry her across the world to a new beginning. As the plane continued to fill with passengers, her nerves began to tremble deeply, prompting her to reach into her carryon bag and pull out her picture of Kagami and her etching of Kagami's name from the memorial wall. Taking simple glimpses of these possessions brought her great stress relief as she couldn't help but hug and kiss them.

Tsukasa breathed deeply, remembering the teary sendoff she got from her family as they dropped her off at her gate. When Miki hugged her youngest daughter, the rest of the family feared they would need a jackhammer to get her to let go. The Hiiragi housewife nearly lost her daughter a year ago and now she was about to lose her not to death, but to life itself. She cried over Tsukasa and cried even louder when she pulled away from her hug to move to her father. It too was an emotional connection as he hugged his youngest child with tender loving care and released a tear.

When Tsukasa's hug with her father was over, she moved to her biggest sister, Inori. She was proving to be the strongest of the crowd as she patted her little sister on the back while embracing

her. "Don't forget to send us lots of pictures and email us every day." Inori commanded.

"I will." Tsukasa replied and backed away from Inori, moving onto Matsuri and Lance.

"Take good care of Kyou-chan for me." Tsukasa whispered as she collected Matsuri's hands.

Lance suddenly interjected. "Not a problem. He likes his bottles full of bourbon, right?"

Matsuri quickly formed a fist with her right hand and launched it into her fiancé's ribcage, knocking the wind out of him and he groaned loudly as he bent down and held his aching chest. Tsukasa couldn't help but giggle at the movement.

"This is no time for jokes." Matsuri snapped.

"And this is no time for foreplay." Lance wheezed, making Matsuri's face burn bright red but she quickly shook it off and held her sister's hands again.

"We promise, Tsukasa. He'll be here waiting anxiously for you when you get home now come here." Matsuri reassured with a grin and hugged her sister tightly.

Tsukasa finally moved to Lance, who still clutched his torso while bending over. She patted him on the shoulders and asked, "Are you okay there?"

"I call spouse abuse on that." Lance squeaked as a joke, still making Tsukasa smile. "By the way Tsukasa, you have killer shoes. Do they come in my size?"

Tsukasa giggled again. "I'll see if I can send you a pair if I find them. I love you, Lance."

"Right back at you, kid. I would stand and hug you but I think

your sister punched my two lungs together." Lance said.

Tsukasa bent down and kissed her brother-in-law on his head as he waved goodbye while still looking at the floor. As quickly as Tsukasa's brief playback came, it was over and she giggled again. She felt eternally loved and forever strong as a result of not only the friends she had, but also the family she became closer to that Kagami helped establish for her. The plane began to taxi away from the terminal and make its way to the tarmac where it would soon takeoff.

Back in Saitama, Konata and Ayano still needed to be surrounded by the names of their friends so they visited the Ryoo High School shooting memorial. The two girls sat next to each other on a white stone bench near the marble walls bearing all the fallen names and Konata inched closer to Ayano.

"I…I've been having this dream. I would be walking through the hallways of school and all of a sudden, Kagami would appear in her uniform and everything, like nothing ever happened…with those beautiful eyes and twin pigtails." Konata began to choke as her emotions flared and nestled closer to Ayano, who stared forward with also a sad face. "And I would say, 'hey Kagamin, where have you been?' But she doesn't answer my question. She just smiles, winks at me, and replies, 'you better hurry and get to class, Konata. Pulling all those all-nighters won't keep helping you in the long run.' And then she's gone. But she's always happy when she goes off to her next class…so no matter where she is…I know she has to be happy."

Ayano's eyes flooded until they reached their capacity and the tears fell from them. Her only response was, "I love that dream, Kona-chan."

Konata formed a small smile and nodded. "Aya-chan…will my dad ever come out of the coma? Do you think my cousin and her husband will divorce each other?"

The orange-haired girl sighed. "No matter what, you're my friend and I'll always be here for you. Life is scary and unpredictable, but as long as you have friends, there isn't any obstacle you

cannot overcome. Misa-chan told me that."

The two girls found their hands on the bench and connected them. Konata leaned her head on Ayano's shoulder, prompting Ayano to nestle her head on Konata's. They allowed the peace and tranquility of the memorial garden to take their troubles away and Konata simply smiled when she closed her eyes.

Miyuki stayed close with Yutaka as they walked together down the street in the pink-haired girl's quiet neighborhood. They were silent for awhile as the day wore on but not much had to be said. Still, Miyuki still played a guardian role for Yutaka despite the fact that she herself still felt vulnerable and uncertain.

"Do you promise to keep in touch with me tonight?" Miyuki asked, trying not to make her voice sound so weak and defenseless.

Yutaka suddenly stopped walking and looked up at Miyuki. "Yuki-chan…it's okay. You don't have to keep pretending anymore. You still miss Minami, don't you? Don't worry, I miss her too everyday and you're not alone. I know I wasn't a good friend to you since that awful day took her away from us, but I promise you from here on out, I will be your best friend. I expect you to do the same for me…to never let me be alone when I'm sad and at times, be sad with me."

The salmon-haired girl reached into her pocket and grasped something. She slowly pulled it out and Miyuki's heart was set ablaze with happiness when she saw Yutaka grip the walkie-talkie she gave her.

"I think I'd like to talk later tonight." Yutaka finished with a sincere smile.

Miyuki fell to her knees and cried. She covered her face and wept deeply, prompting Yutaka to walk over to her and hug her head to her chest and stroke her pink hair. The two girls were now closer than ever and knew they could count on each other to see each other through their inevitable more sad days in their recovery process. These bonds the five surviving girls felt were

unlike anything else ever formed in their lives. It took a tragedy to tear them apart, but it took themselves and the pieces they were left with to rebuild their lives and now, they had no regrets for being friends. No one had to say it, but as stated by someone before, there was something very special and unique that surrounded this group of girls. They remained together as not even the hot metal of murderous bullets or the mental strains of losing a loved one could separate them. Yutaka felt this especially when she kissed the top of Miyuki's crying head.

As the airplane carrying Tsukasa began to speed up as it prepared to takeoff, so did Tsukasa's heart. Sweat was beginning to form across her head and her hands trembled while she hyperventilated. To keep herself from panicking, she began to think about Kagami and her strength to pull her through her nervousness. However, a specific memory played for Tsukasa, as if it was part of some divine plan for her to see. A distant memory from the shooting flashed in her head of when Izumi Wakase first entered their classroom and Tsukasa was crying. Kagami's words echoed in her mind as Tsukasa could hear them as clear as day.

Well you can't give up now, Tsukasa. You haven't even had the chance to show our family your true potentials and talents yet. Our family is filled with so many amazing people, some could even be considered heroes further back in our history. From leaders, to war heroes, to community icons, to budding academic scholars, and even to the unsung heroes who hold families together like mom. Now all we have to do is wait for you to shine and make us all proud. You know what? You hail from the damn Hiiragi's, Tsukasa. Is there anything better in the world?

Tsukasa let a tear fall from her eyes as she smiled and nodded. She couldn't help but whisper, "Thank you, sis. I will make you proud. I love you."

The airplane took off from the runway and Tsukasa watched herself rise higher and higher into the sky. The sun shining down on her in the beautiful spring day became brighter and Tsukasa finally shined in the light. She could feel her sister's soul in the warmth and could even see her face in the clouds as their souls and hearts linked. Bonds of sisterhood. One that was never dented.

THE END

A/N: There you go! Probably not one of my favorite ones but I still hope everyone enjoyed and don't forget to review and check out "I Was Kagami Hiiragi"